Neu-Sandec, about ninety miles to the west, it rained heavily, the sky burdened by dark clouds.

The Habsburg Army would never be the same again. Of the 900,000 men who had marched north to face General Ivanov's Southwest Front, fewer than two thirds reached the San. In four weeks of campaigning, perhaps as many as 250,000 soldiers were killed or wounded and another 100,000 taken prisoner, with losses falling particularly heavily upon long-serving regular officers who could not easily be replaced. Leading their men from the front, often riding up and down the lines in plain sight of the enemy, Habsburg officers were easily spotted and easily killed.[42] While the staff at AOK congratulated themselves on such valour and courage, the long trail of shattered regiments streaming away from the line told another story: one of disorganization, hopelessness and terror. 'Train convoys of all military branches blocked the streets for miles', recorded one witness. 'The infantry had been marching along the fields next to the streets so as not to get caught up in the chaos. All the languages of the monarchy could be heard screeching in a wild cacophony of voices; the drivers struck each other with their whips, horse-mounted train commanders vented their frustration with repeated shots from their pistols. Hundreds of broken and bullet-ridden wagons lay in the trenches, alongside bloated horse carcasses and the corpses of soldiers.'[43]

AOK now began urgently to look for German support. Archduke Friedrich had written to the Kaiser as early as 2 September requesting an offensive out of Silesia, while reminding him of Germany's promise to send aid after the defeat of France. The Kaiser, unimpressed by such special pleading, dismissed it angrily, telling the Austro-Hungarian military liaison officer, Josef Stürgkh, that his 'small army' had fought off twelve enemy corps, several of which had been completely destroyed. 'You can't ask more of her than what she has achieved.'[44] Such an attitude would only become more pronounced as Austria–Hungary became even less able to mount independent operations. Stürgkh found himself an outsider at OHL, struggling to pick up information on how the war in the west was unfolding and

increasingly aware of the fundamentally different perspectives on strategy held by the two allies: between Moltke's relentless focus on the Western Front and Conrad's obvious preoccupation with Russia. 'Our federal relationship was subjected to an extreme test of endurance during the first few weeks of war', he later admitted. 'It prevailed. However, there is no doubt that the relationship between the two army commanders was infused with a creeping poison, with distrust and resentment on one side, and anger at the disappointment and dismissive doubts on the other.'[45]

Moltke was not destined to stay in his post for much longer. The campaign in France had started well, but the German Army had been outflanked and counter-attacked in a series of brutal battles along the Marne river between 5 and 10 September, bringing the Schlieffen Plan to a shuddering halt. Moltke had found the burden of command too much and been relieved of his duties on 14 September, replaced by the Prussian Minister of War, Erich von Falkenhayn. Although Falkenhayn had forged a good relationship with the Kaiser, who admired his robust self-confidence, he was not well liked within the General Staff because he had no claim to the position on grounds of seniority (being only 53 years of age) and was decried as a prickly individual, too independent and difficult for such an esteemed role.[46] Despite the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, Falkenhayn was instructed to renew the assault in the west, drawing forces from his left flank and redeploying them in a major offensive towards the Belgian town of Ypres and the Channel ports, aiming to drive the Allies into the sea and then resume the advance on Paris. As for the Eastern Front, he was unsure. He knew that support had to be given to the Austrians, but how this was to be done was, in his words, 'not easy to answer'.[47]

One of Moltke's final acts as Chief of the General Staff was to authorize the deployment of two corps to East Prussia after the action at Gumbinnen. Although these units arrived too late to be of use at Tannenberg, they were a welcome reinforcement when Eighth Army turned its attention to Rennenkampf's First Army, which was now the only sizeable Russian force left on German soil. OHL informed Hindenburg of the arrival of the two new corps on 31 August, ordering him to 'clear East Prussia of Rennenkampf's army'

and follow up 'in the direction of Warsaw'.[48] Hindenburg was eager to help the Austrians, but his primary focus was on how to get at Rennenkampf in the same way he had destroyed Samsonov, and it was unlikely to be as easy the second time around. On 7 September, aerial reconnaissance revealed that there was 'a wide distribution of troops behind the Russian north flank', possibly about three corps 'stretching as far back as Insterburg'. If these reports were accurate, such a distribution of forces would enable an 'overwhelming attack' against the weak Russian left.[49]

Despite the success of Tannenberg, German commanders were wary of attacking fortified positions and knew well enough how good the Russians were at constructing field defences. Therefore, Hindenburg planned to launch his forces in a long march through the Masurian Lakes to strike the Russian left flank, allowing their position to be rolled up from the south. After several days of skirmishing, the general attack opened on the morning of 8 September. Rennenkampf had been expecting an attack and had prepared his men for a stubborn defensive action. Throughout most of the day, his divisions held on, repulsing numerous attempts to push forward and counter-attacking whenever they could, but the dominance of German artillery was devastating. 'The dreadful explosions of heavy shells, which sent black pillars of smoke and earth up into the air, made a horrific impression on the riflemen', recalled one Russian officer, Aleksandr Verkhovsky. 'On the very first day of the fight, I met several people who had lost their sanity right on the battlefield. An explosion of a single "suitcase" artillery shell caused buildings to collapse like houses of cards, uprooted the trees, bent gun carriages as if they were made of wax, and sent ragged shrapnel whistling through the air in all directions, tearing open flesh and inflicting the most severe wounds.'[50] On the evening of 9 September, worried about being outflanked on his left, Rennenkampf issued orders for the withdrawal of his army to the east.

Rennenkampf may have avoided total defeat, but his army had been badly mauled, sustaining 100,000 casualties, including 45,000 men taken prisoner – about a third of its strength. Losses in the German Eighth Army were about 37,000 for the whole campaign, a

modest sum for the huge damage that had been inflicted upon the Russian war effort.[51] Although Russia would recover, the German Army had now seized a priceless moral advantage on the battlefield, demonstrating superior tactical and operational skills and showing the world that its leaders, at least in the east, were still possessed of the 'genius for war'. Hindenburg was now famous throughout the Central Powers, his name uncorrupted by the ensuing stalemate in France. Debate over who should take credit for the victory would go on for years, but Hindenburg (assisted by Ludendorff) was ultimately responsible for the execution of the plan, seeing it through where lesser men might have flinched and refused to roll the dice. The victory of Tannenberg, alongside its near sequel at the Masurian Lakes, sealed his glorious reputation, restoring the prowess of German arms and raising the prospect that the war could be won not in the west but in the east.

However promising Germany's situation on the Eastern Front had become, the dead weight of Austrian failure was already debilitating. On 14 September, the day that Falkenhayn had replaced Moltke, Archduke Friedrich again wrote to the Kaiser calling for more co-ordinated operations. 'With regard to the drafting in of German forces, the Austro-Hungarian Army will only strike the Eighth Army when and where union with these forces is guaranteed. Operation via the Narew is no longer in any way viable. Joining forces in Western Galicia is the only option under consideration. I therefore suggest that Your Highness may wish to provide transportation via Krakow sooner rather than later.' Despite only just having taken over from Moltke, Falkenhayn recognized that immediate support for the Austrians was 'politically necessary', so he authorized the formation of a new army with troops taken from East Prussia. They were to be transported to the Silesian border and would operate against the Russian flank. Although the Archduke was pleased by the prospect of German troops bolstering the Austrian line, his request that Ninth Army come under Habsburg control was quickly shut down when Hindenburg was appointed its commander (because he held greater seniority than Friedrich).[52]

For Russia, not even the capture of Lemberg could make amends

for the terrible setbacks in East Prussia. At the Northwest Front, Zhilinsky was furious. Blaming the commander of First Army for what had happened, he sacked Rennenkampf and penned a long report to *Stavka* complaining that his 'categorical orders' had not been followed. Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich looked on aghast. Although possessed of a volcanic temper when roused, Nikolai usually took a laisser-faire approach to command, letting his subordinates work through problems and only intervening when things went wrong. But now worries over the state of Rennenkampf's army proved too much for him. To lose one army in East Prussia was unfortunate; to lose two would be unforgivable. He sent his Chief of Staff, Yanushkevich, to First Army and found the situation much better than he had feared. Rennenkampf had successfully extricated his army and escaped a second Tannenberg. Recognizing that he had lost faith in Zhilinsky, Nikolai replaced him with the commander of Third Army in Galicia, General Ruzski, and also reinstated Rennenkampf. On 12 September, still mired in a deep-set gloom, he wired the Tsar: 'I openly admit that I did not understand how to carry out my orders, and so I place my guilty head at Your Majesty's feet.'[53]

3. 'Our brave army deserved a better fate'

The Habsburg retreat did not stop at the San. Because the river line was largely indefensible, Conrad had little choice but to let his armies continue their march towards the Carpathians. But this meant that the fortress of Przemyśl would have to be abandoned. With almost 50 miles of perimeter defences, drawn up in three great concentric rings, containing 19 permanent and 23 smaller forts, Przemyśl was a symbol of imperial power, guarding the passes into the mountains and forming 'the first line of defence against a Tsarist invasion of Galicia'. Knowing that he could not allow such a prize to fall into Russian hands, Conrad ordered that a garrison of six divisions (about 130,000 men) be left behind, while planning for a counter-attack as soon as possible. On the evening of 16 September, AOK issued order No. 2096: 'The Fortress Przemyśl will, for the moment, stand on its own and is to hold at all costs.'[1]

The state of the Austro-Hungarian Army was pitiful. As the long columns of pike-grey infantry trailed back along roads turned to slush by heavy rainfall, morale slumped. AOK calculated that its four main armies had now been reduced to around 400,000 men, with Third Army mustering just 70,000 effectives.[2] Such heavy wastage was particularly noticeable in the officer corps, which had been decimated in the early battles, with an alarming number of survivors breaking down or committing suicide. Conrad, never one to shy away from decisive measures, began taking action against those who were deemed to have failed. General Bruderman was dismissed a day after Lemberg had fallen, while General Auffenberg, the hero of Komarów, was asked to report sick in late September. He had once been 'a keen, critical spirit' possessed of a 'scintillating wit', but was now a 'tired, broken old man . . . with a weary voice'. By the end of 1914, four army commanders, six corps commanders, ten divisional

commanders and twelve brigade commanders would be dismissed. It was a purge unprecedented in the empire's long history.[3]

The casualties of the opening campaigns even reached AOK. On 16 September, news arrived that Conrad's son, Lieutenant Herbert Freiherr von Conrad of 15 Dragoon Regiment, had been killed in action. Conrad's adjutant, Major Kundmann, visited him in his office and, with a pained expression on his face, prompted Conrad to ask if there was bad news from the front. Kundmann said that it was a personal matter concerning his son. Conrad asked if he was 'badly wounded', only for Kundmann to mutter that it was 'more than that'. He had fallen at Rawa Ruska on 8 September and was buried in a nearby churchyard. 'The force of the blow shook me deeply', remembered Conrad. 'Major Kundmann comforted me with great warmth and amity. However, I asked him to leave me alone for a short while so that I could pull myself together.' Conrad took an hour to wallow in grief and shock before washing his face, straightening his jacket and regaining his composure. 'The gravity of the war situation made it necessary to switch off any personal feelings. I made my way to the operations office, received the announcements from my officers and went about my usual work.'[4]

Conrad's mood was not improved by the situation in the Balkans. Still smarting from his repulse in August, General Potiorek had sent a stream of telegrams to the Military Chancellery in Vienna calling for a renewed invasion and insisting that the Serbs were on the verge of collapse. Although Conrad was not keen on a new offensive, a number of powerful political figures, including Tisza and Berchtold, successfully lobbied the Emperor to sanction Potiorek's plans, effectively ending Conrad's control of operations in the Balkans.[5] Fifth Army went forward in the early hours of 14 September, crossing the dark waters of the Sava as a preliminary bombardment lit up the far bank, sweeping away the defenders and allowing them to advance two miles into the northern tip of Serbia. But then movement slowed. The Serbs had dug an array of well-fortified lines and it took time and effort for Habsburg forces to fight their way through. Relying heavily upon their sappers, Austrian infantry quickly realized that specialist equipment – hand grenades, flare pistols, illumination rounds from mortars, and flame-throwers – was invaluable in this kind of fighting, even if progress remained modest.[6]

Fifth Army had come to a halt by the first week of October. Its battalions, often at half strength or less, lacking officers and NCOs, could not break the Serb lines. Potiorek ordered his men to advance 'without fear of losses', but crippling shortages of shells meant that attacks quickly broke down or could not be exploited.[7] Major General Alfred Krauss, commander of the Austro-Hungarian Combined Corps, complained that after weeks of campaigning, his force was a shadow of its former self. 'The 29th Division had only 6,500 men instead of 17,000; the lack of officers in particular would make any attack very difficult. The *Landsturm* battalions were not suited to heavy attack; four battalions would be commanded by *Landsturm* lieutenants. The artillery was too weak in terms of gun numbers, effectiveness and ammunition supplies, to adequately prepare for the attack. But it all fell on deaf ears. The idea was all wrong. It was believed that one could use human bodies to penetrate a fortified front.' This was even more dangerous given the capability of their opponents. 'I considered and do still consider their soldiers to be the strongest of our enemies', Krauss added. 'Frugal, resourceful, skilful, extraordinarily mobile, well armed, abundantly furnished with ammunition, agile in the terrain, very well led, and inflamed for battle by hatred and ardour, they presented more of a problem to our troops than the Russians, Romanians and Italians.'[8]

It was abundantly evident now, perhaps more than ever, that Austria desperately needed help from her allies. Conrad met Ludendorff for the first time on 18 September at AOK's new base at Neu-Sandec. 'The reputation of the "Stormer of Liège" preceded him,' remembered Conrad, 'his name being connected with the victories in East Prussia. We engaged openly and honestly with one another and hit it off right away. Neither of us minced our words.' Ludendorff liked Conrad, whom he found to be 'clever' and 'distinguished' with a 'genuine soldierly character', albeit having to lead an army that 'was not always strong enough to carry out his bold plans'. If Ludendorff's faint praise revealed some of Germany's misgivings about the Habsburg Army, Conrad's warm words also masked his own disillusionment

about his ally, and he was not shy in blaming Austro-Hungary's reverses on Germany's refusal to mount an offensive on the Eastern Front in the opening stages of the war, leaving him to shoulder the burden alone. They had faced off against 52 Russian divisions, each of which, he noted, contained at least 3,000 more men than their own units.[9]

With a large map of the Eastern Front unrolled upon a table, they talked over their plans: where Germany should mount her offensive, and how they would cooperate. It was agreed that a new counter-offensive would be conducted by Ninth Army, moving east towards Ivangorod on the Vistula, with Dankl's First Army securing their right flank, which would mark the beginning of a broader Habsburg push towards Przemyśl.

'For Hindenburg, the stronger you are on the left wing, the better,' said Ludendorff.

'The Carpathians are occupied,' replied Conrad.

'Yet the situation as a whole is still hopeful. We shall approach it with confidence. But if the Russians do not follow up, they shall have to leave strong forces behind at Przemyśl.'

'Then we shall go to Galicia and you to Russian Poland.'[10]

The swamping, suffocating weight of Russian forces preyed heavily upon Conrad's mind, causing him to become a distracted, almost sunken figure by the last days of September. Although he still harboured dreams of martial glory, of grand counter-offensives that would restore his position, they grew fainter every day. In a letter to Arthur von Bolfras, head of the Emperor's Military Chancellery, he reported on Ludendorff's visit and outlined his hopes for a 'decisive blow' at the beginning of October, but then he slipped into a familiar self-pitying lament about the perilous state of the empire. 'Having fought ... against an overwhelmingly superior force – perhaps not with decisive success, but certainly with great honour – our brave army deserved a better fate. Yet, abandoned by all allies, it was left to fight off a far superior enemy alone.'[11]

That 'superior enemy' was drawing closer every day. The first elements of the Russian Third Army reached Przemyśl on 16 September. Taking their time to scout the Habsburg position, noting the

location of the fortresses, the long lines of trenches, recently sown minefields and newly cleared fields of fire (made by the felling of thousands of trees), it would be another ten days before the entire fortress complex was surrounded.[12] The lack of heavy artillery in the Russian inventory meant that it was not possible to recreate the tactics that Moltke had used so successfully against the Belgian and French forts (when Škoda mortars and Krupp howitzers had cracked them open in a matter of days), so General Ivanov had little choice but to wait. 'A siege of Przemyśl is not part of my plans', the Grand Duke had telegraphed on 21 September. 'I consider that you should limit yourself to screening it.' Ivanov was ordered to keep a close watch on the enemy, and if they continued to fall back behind the Carpathians, he was to 'cork up the exits' and then 'move in a north-westerly direction toward Cracow and Posen'.[13]

The Grand Duke's focus was now on Poland. On 22 September, he travelled to Cholm to meet his two front commanders, Ivanov and Ruzski, and they discussed the latest intelligence reports, which had correctly identified an enemy build-up around Krakow. The risk of a German advance towards the Vistula, potentially unhinging Russia's flank in Galicia, was obvious to all. As Danilov wrote: 'The most dangerous in our eyes was the strike prepared by the enemy marching along the left bank. There stood not only our main enemy but also our strongest: the Germans. From this point, our entire position in Galicia could be at risk.' It was agreed to redeploy Fourth Army north to Ivangorod, while sending more cavalry to western Poland to keep an eye on what the Germans were doing.[14] Nikolai Nikolaevich was not, however, satisfied with the movement of a single army and wanted to do more, dusting off an old scheme for a bold push into the heart of Germany. By 28 September, Ivanov and Ruzski had been informed that the Grand Duke now intended to mount a larger and more aggressive offensive. He proposed to mass three armies, Fourth, Ninth and Fifth, along the Vistula and the San, with a rapidly reconstructed Second Army (partially rebuilt with elite troops from Siberia) concentrated around Warsaw. Both fronts were 'to prepare to go on the offensive from the middle Vistula ... for a deep strike into Germany'.[15] Although this required what Danilov called a 'rather

complicated regrouping', as well as a series of long marches, it promised decisive success. Ivanov was placed in charge of this 'regrouping', with the remaining armies in Galicia coming under General Brusilov, who had formerly commanded Eighth Army in its drive on Lemberg.[16]

Such a massive counter-manoeuvre would certainly please the French. On 14 September, the French Ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, received a telegram from the Foreign Minister, Théophile Delcassé, urging Russia to conduct a 'direct offensive against Germany'. Paléologue met with Sukhomlinov that day and impressed upon him the concern in Paris that the Russians 'may have had their heads turned by their relatively easy successes in Galicia and may neglect the German front in order to concentrate on forcing their way to Vienna'. Although Germany had retreated from the Marne, her armies had dug in along the Aisne river and showed no sign of going anywhere, which only added to the frustrations in France that the Russians were squandering another chance to press their advantage. Sukhomlinov pushed away Paléologue's comment and replied that Russia had begun her offensive into Germany in early August and had 'already sacrificed 110,000 men . . . to help the French army!' However, he did admit that the Grand Duke was currently preparing 'an operation on a wide front in the direction of Posen and Breslau [Wroclaw]', which pleased the Ambassador.[17]

As always with the Russian Army, squabbles between the generals quickly surfaced. Already the two front commanders faced different ways, with divergent priorities and competing supply needs. At the Northwest Front, General Ruzski's characteristic caution was soon evident as he worried about the weakness of his forces around East Prussia. Indeed, should Germany go on to the offensive in the north, Ruzski believed that there was little to stop her forces creating havoc, even as far as the capital, St Petersburg (now renamed to the less Germanic-sounding 'Petrograd'). Therefore, the Russians might have to consider a phased withdrawal to consolidate their lines, perhaps up to the Niemen river. The Southwest Front took a different view. Ivanov and his capable Chief of Staff, Mikhail Alekseev, wanted to keep the Galician offensive going, pushing the Austrians back through the mountains and then breaking into the Hungarian Plain to seize Budapest.[18]

In the absence of clear direction from *Stavka*, both commanders were left to fight it out for themselves, which only increased the rancour between them. When Ivanov heard of Ruzski's plans to retreat, he fired off an angry telegram to *Stavka* protesting in the strongest terms he could muster:

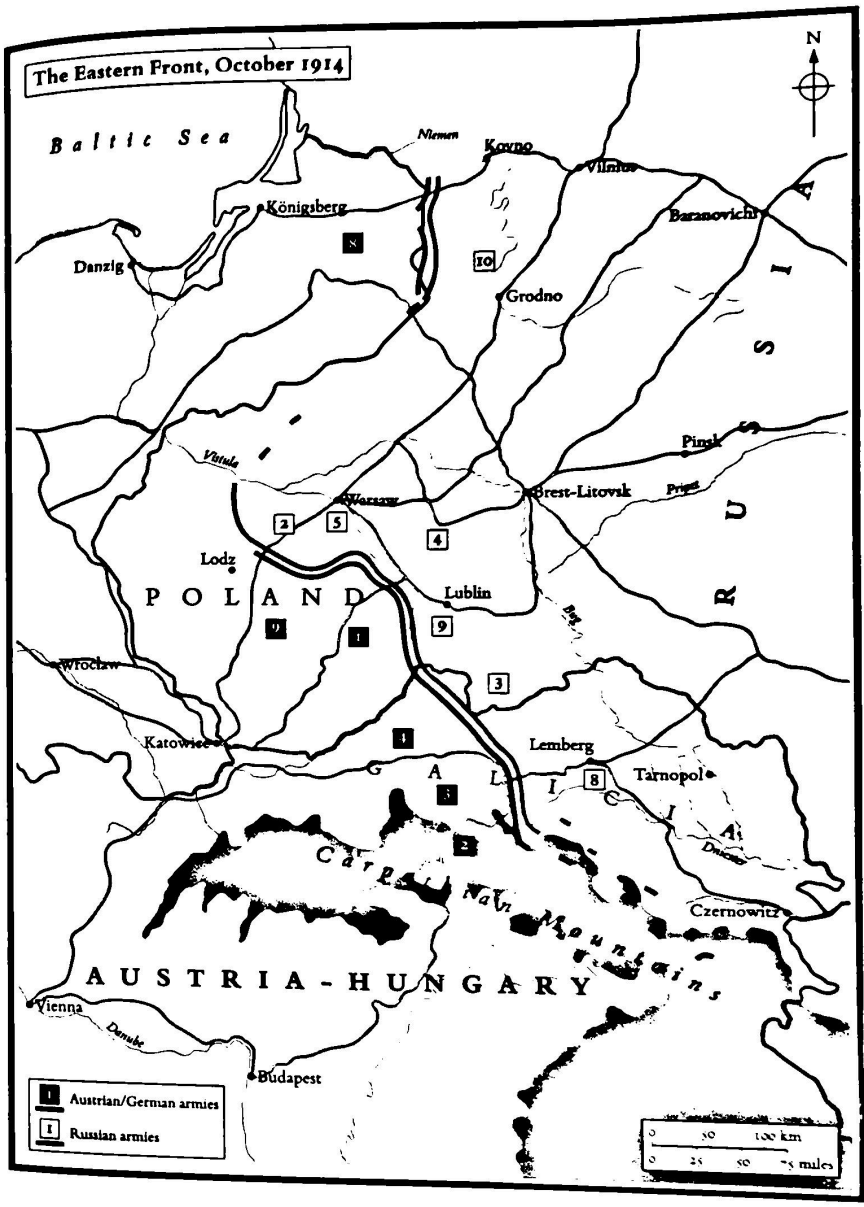
> Although it would be prudent for the Germans to proceed with caution and merely imitate real military activity, the armies of General Ruzski will not prevent the enemy from taking forceful action in the direction of Ivangorod and Lublin. The moral impact of the occupation of Warsaw must not be underestimated. The rear of the three armies is so complex and has so many supply dumps and reserves that it would take a great amount of time and tremendous effort to redeploy it. A change of location is a difficult endeavour in itself, and in the situation the southwestern armies have to face, this task becomes even harder. There are few paths south of Polesie – barely enough for two armies, and yet there are five armies that will have to use them. I need to know exactly when General Ruzski intends to withdraw his troops. It would be necessary to coincide his withdrawal with the time when the entire rear of the three armies of the Southwestern Front will be redeployed.[19]

Ruzski was unmoved. He dragged his heels on supplying troops to the Warsaw operation, haggling over units and only sending those that were not up to full strength, which provoked an angry telegram from Danilov reminding him that 'according to the Supreme Commander and with regard to the whole situation, the fate of the first stage of the campaign and perhaps of the entire war will be decided on the banks of the Vistula. Under such circumstances, as you yourself would agree, it is imperative that we make every possible effort to ensure the success of the operation. Everything must serve the main goal . . .'[20]

This lack of cooperation within the Russian High Command would seriously undermine its operations throughout the war, preventing Russia from bringing all her strength to bear and forcing

her commanders to spend precious time bickering among themselves. At the centre of it all was the Grand Duke. He was still committed to assisting the French by conducting an operation into the heart of Germany (he famously kept a French flag at his headquarters), but could not bring his subordinates around to a single plan of operations and was temperamentally unsuited to bending stubborn, powerful individuals to his will. Andrei Zaionchkovski, who commanded a corps in 1914, thought that Nikolai had little idea of what he really wanted to achieve. 'The Grand Duke – who gave the impression of being a "tough man" by his conduct, but was amenable to the influence of people from his inner circle . . . could barely defend his position and, contrary to pragmatic military logic, often gave in to the selfish and narrow strategic ideas of Ruzski and Ivanov, who pushed exclusively in favour of their fronts.' The role of the Commander-in-Chief, he lamented, 'was reduced to finding compromises in an attempt to bridge the gap between the views of his two assistants. Therefore, the plan for the upcoming operation was made with great difficulty, and went through a number of compromised stages before rather belatedly taking its decisive form.'[21]

Given the difficulties of moving such a mass of men, guns and horses across ground wet from days of rain, it was something of a miracle that the Grand Duke's great march was completed at all. While thousands of troops were able to move into position via Russia's railways, most had to get there on foot. 'The road was in a dreadful state', remembered Alfred Knox, British Military Attaché, who passed along the route from Lublin to Krasnik. 'Originally a *chaussée* [a paved highway], it had been broken up by heavy artillery, pontoons, etc., and owing to the recent rains the whole was covered with several inches of liquid mud. This made it impossible to see the holes and quite dangerous to ride on the road . . . On the very outside one saw infantry struggling along the comparatively good going on the water-logged plough land.'[22] Even though Russian troops trudged on, day after day, often with little food, they were able to redeploy by the second week of October, taking up positions along a new



battlefront some 170 miles in length, running from Warsaw down to Sandomierz and then along the San towards Przemyśl.

The Germans were already on the move, marching with their characteristic speed and sense of purpose. Their own offensive had begun on 28 September with four German corps striking out from Katowice and making good progress despite difficult ground conditions. The main road from Krakow to Warsaw was 'knee deep' with 'a layer of mud a foot high', which made enormous demands on the labour battalions and engineering companies to keep the advance going.[23] Because the Russians had placed the bulk of their strength much further east, German divisions met with little but roaming enemy cavalry in the first few days of the offensive, and it was only when Ninth Army reached the wide expanse of the Vistula, in places up to one and a half miles across, that progress came to a halt. On their right, General Dankl's troops had only started their general advance on 1 October (after Conrad insisted on giving them a few more days of rest), but likewise found little in front of them, with wireless intercepts revealing that the Russian Ninth Army had withdrawn north several days earlier.

The first clashes were inconclusive. German artillery bombarded Russian positions along the east bank of the Vistula, and occasionally the Germans sent aircraft, even one of their Zeppelin airships, over enemy lines to spread terror. Germany had relied upon her flying service since the opening days of the war to provide long-range reconnaissance, and even though she only possessed a handful of fragile machines, they provided early warning of Russian movements, particularly any large-scale crossings of the river. On their right, the Austrian First Army was also advancing towards the confluence of the Vistula and the San to threaten the Russian flank, Conrad having scooped up every last soldier he could. 'The offensive was advancing everywhere,' he noted on 6 October, 'but the incessant rain . . . put the roads in a miserable state, which not only made the march extremely strenuous, but also seriously delayed it.'[24]

Gradually the two great hosts closed with each other, separated by the waters of the Vistula, now swollen by the autumn rains. The wet weather and surging, sucking mud gave this campaign an infamous

reputation, seemingly confirming Falkenhayn's comment (upon replacing Moltke) that little could be expected from the Eastern Front. 'In view of the almost unlimited power of the Russians to evade a final decision by arms as long as they pleased,' he wrote, 'there was no hope of finishing with them before the enemies in the West had either won a decisive success or had so strengthened themselves with their almost unlimited resources as to leave little prospect of any German success over them.'[25] Victory, in Falkenhayn's opinion, could only come after a final reckoning with the Entente, and so he kept attacking in the west, trying to break the line in Flanders before the winter closed off any possibility of decisive success in 1914.

Showing their characteristic independence and single-mindedness, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were unimpressed by Falkenhayn's strategic judgement and continued with their plans anyway, determined to bend events to their will. On 9 October, Hindenburg ordered one of his most reliable field commanders, General August von Mackensen, to lead a task force north towards Warsaw, hoping that a quick seizure could be made. Although Mackensen forged ahead with his usual sense of purpose, when he stumbled upon a Russian order revealing the extent of the Grand Duke's plans, the mood changed. The Germans were faced not with a weakly defended flank, ripe for exploitation, but a solid array of four Russian armies, perhaps as many as 200 battalions against just 60 of their own. The plan was for the Russians to hold the line of the Vistula and then mount a decisive attack from Warsaw, which would either envelop German forces or push them into a precipitate retreat. If Russia's plans succeeded, 'not only our Ninth Army would be in danger, but our whole Eastern front, Silesia, and indeed the whole country, would be faced with a catastrophe'. It was, as Hindenburg later admitted, 'unquestionably a great plan . . . indeed the greatest I had known . . .'[26]

Yet the Russians struggled to launch their counter-offensive, hamstrung by command confusion and logistical bottlenecks. General Plehve's Fifth Army, which had been assigned to Ruzski's Northwest Front, had moved into position around Warsaw, only to find that supplies and ammunition were not forthcoming. Ruzski was still

continuing his feud with Ivanov and was loath to provide resources for an operation that he would not command, leaving Fifth Army in a state of suspended animation. Although Russian commanders had already recognized that they could not compete with the German ability to manoeuvre and deploy quickly, the spiralling problem of feeding and supplying troops was threatening to strangle *Stavka*'s 'great plan' in its opening stages. With Ivanov wanting to wait until all his forces had come up before launching his attack, the Grand Duke was left to ponder on the vast gulf between issuing an order and seeing it carried out. Several years earlier, while on manoeuvres with the French Army, he had told the French President, Raymond Poincaré, that 'In our vast empire, having given an order, you can never be sure whether it will reach its destination.'[27]

Despite, or perhaps because of, the pressure being placed upon Hindenburg's army, promising strategic developments were soon to arise elsewhere along the front. With the redeployment of Russian troops to the north, *Stavka* had no choice but to abandon the siege of Przemyśl; a decision that was not taken lightly, but which was deemed essential in the circumstances. In a letter to Alekseev on 29 September, Yanushkevich explained that the Vistula front had now 'acquired a special importance' and it was necessary to withdraw troops from both the northern and the Galician front. 'It anguishes and embitters that your victorious advance has had to be cut short; it is painful to realise that if Lechitsky and Evert [two army commanders] had had one or two more days to act, they would have spread total panic among the Austrians, but the seriousness of the threat for you and for the common cause from Kalisz and Posen is too obvious.'[28]

The Grand Duke had wished to merely screen the fortress, but General Brusilov had no intention of letting the defenders off lightly, so he authorized heavy attacks in early October. Although Russian guns were able to seriously damage the fieldworks that surrounded the city – clearing away barbed-wire entanglements and smashing thin trenches – the main forts were largely unharmed. Lacking the super-heavy artillery that might have collapsed their thick walls and roofs, Brusilov was left hoping that his field guns would so demoralize the garrison that they would surrender. Around 45,000 shells were fired off between 5 and 8 October, causing a terrifying rolling roar to echo around the city as its citizens huddled in their homes. Sapping forward under constant fire, Russian troops closed the distance to the Austrian trenches before launching themselves in desperate frontal assaults. Perhaps as many as 10,000 Russian soldiers were killed or wounded in these attacks, their bodies lying up to a metre deep as they were caught in devastating machine-gun and artillery fire. With no chance of breaking through, Brusilov had no choice but to abandon the siege and march north. On 9 October, the day that Hindenburg had sent Mackensen towards Warsaw, the fortress was relieved by Habsburg cavalry, exhausted yet triumphant.[29]

The struggle on the crucial Vistula front was becoming increasingly bitter. Mackensen had got to within ten kilometres of Warsaw by the evening of 11 October, but was faced with Russian reinforcements streaming south from the city. 'We are currently living in a very tense situation, both tactically and operationally', he wrote. 'This has meant that my corps and I are placed on the most important flank.' He noticed the sheer variety of troops he was encountering, including Cossacks from the Urals and Turkestan, and those who had come directly from Vladivostok along the Trans-Siberian Railway. 'Russia is drafting in every last one of its men.'[30] Although they were thrown into battle in a haphazard fashion, they exhibited a stubbornness that surprised German observers. 'Heavy fighting the last three days, many attempts to force a passage on a large scale – weak as we are', recorded one of Ludendorff's staff officers, Max Hoffmann, in his diary on 12 October. 'It was indeed the hardest time of the campaign in my experience: the strain goes on day and night – endless panics and alarms.'[31]

With fighting intensifying, a sense of great pressure began to be felt in the German ranks. Wherever they marched, seemingly overwhelming masses of enemy infantry were always there, poised to close. Hindenburg and Ludendorff ordered up their heavy batteries and sent General Max von Gallwitz's Guards Reserve Corps towards Ivangorod, where Russian forces were forming a bridgehead, but the bad weather and sodden ground conditions prevented them from wiping it out. By 13 October, Gallwitz was struggling to prevent the

Russians from securing the two permanent bridges at Ivangorod and Novo-Alexandri, and in a worrying report, he admitted that despite ordering repeated attacks, his men had got nowhere. 'My subordinates claim that our failure to execute the operation is not down to the will of the officers or the morale of the troops, but merely the fact that the boggy terrain and swollen streams make it physically impossible to organise an attack strong enough to overpower the expertly equipped and well-manned position of the enemy. The infantry cannot run, only crawl; some of the artillery has already broken down, and there are no positions from which we could effectively stave off the heavy artillery of the enemy on the other side of the Vistula.'[32]

As the situation worsened, relations between the two allies began to fray. Ludendorff wanted the Austrians to take over more of Ninth Army's front, allowing it to shift northwards, but Conrad did not want to move too far left, which would stretch his line out even further than it already was. On 17 October, both Ludendorff and Hoffmann held lengthy long-distance telephone calls back to OHL in Charleville-Mézières complaining about the urgent need for unified command and the importance of putting the Habsburg First Army under German direction. Both men agreed that the 'main obstacle' was Conrad himself. 'A direct imperial telegram is urgently required in order to achieve subordination of the Austrian First Army under the Ninth Army. With Ninth Army engaged in the most arduous battle against significant superiority, one might say that everything now depends on the consistency of leadership.' When this request was eventually communicated to Emperor Franz Joseph, through Archduke Friedrich and then on to Conrad, it met with a predictably curt refusal. Conrad replied to Friedrich on 18 October admitting that although German forces were in a 'difficult situation', it was important not to subject First Army to 'a similar fate' and he considered 'its subordination under the German Ninth Army to be entirely impractical and downright dangerous. For the unified leadership of both armies, the current tried-and-tested mode of mutual agreement is perfectly adequate.'[33]

Despite seemingly endless delays, the Grand Duke had finally

cornered his generals to mount their attack on 20 October. But before they could cross the Vistula in strength, their opponent had pulled back, escaping the trap that had been so carefully laid at *Stavka*. Yanushkevich urged Ruzski and Ivanov to 'take the most energetic measures' to find the direction of the German retreat and maintain contact, while 'overtaking his rearguards and forcing him to fight'.[34] But the Russians could not move quickly enough and the speed of the Germans' withdrawal was only matched by the skill of their engineers in turning parts of Poland into a ravaged wasteland. Already the rampaging armies on the Eastern Front were coming to resemble marauding bands of medieval peasants, stripping everything of value from the land they marched through, burning villages, stealing cattle and trampling crops. 'The railway stations, water towers and blockhouses were burned down; what was spared from the blaze was blown up, as were the railway lines, bridges, water pipes and viaducts – and with such skill and care that rapid restoration of the destroyed infrastructure was completely out of the question', complained Danilov. 'All in all, a horrific scene of destruction.'[35]

For commanders as ambitious as Hindenburg and Ludendorff, the withdrawal from Poland was a miserable experience. Although the operation had, from a certain perspective, achieved everything that could have been expected of it, forcing the Russians to redeploy their armies and loosening their grip on Przemyśl, the duo were not happy. 'The situation was highly critical', Ludendorff noted sourly. 'We had now to expect that very crisis – the probable invasion of Posen, Silesia and Moravia by Russian armies in superior force – which should have been prevented by our deployment in and advance from Upper Silesia at the end of September.'[36] But with all spare German reserves, including newly raised volunteers, committed to the Western Front, they were left to hope that the heavy destruction meted out to the railways and roads of western Poland would suffice to bring the Russian advance to a standstill.

On 30 October, Ludendorff was summoned to Berlin to meet Falkenhayn. The Chief of the General Staff was adamant that they must keep the bulk of the German Army in France, at least for the

time being. The situation was 'very promising' and they were close to achieving decisive results in Flanders. Ludendorff understood this but asked for greater 'freedom of manoeuvre' on the Eastern Front. As long as German forces were 'chained' to the left of the Habsburg forces, there would only be limited opportunities for manoeuvre, but if they could redeploy and strike the right flank of the Russians – then deep into Poland – they could soon restore their position. Falkenhayn accepted Ludendorff's argument and signed an order that would consolidate the command structure in the east, appointing Hindenburg 'Supreme Commander, German Forces in the East of the Empire' (*Oberbefehlshaber der Gesamten Deutschen Streitkräfte im Osten* or *OberOst*) on 1 November. All German forces in both Eighth and Ninth Armies would now come under Hindenburg's authority, with Ludendorff remaining as his Chief of Staff. Mackensen, who had impressed at Warsaw, was given Ninth Army.[37]

Falkenhayn would come to realize that nothing he did would ever satisfy his generals in the east. The creation of *OberOst* merely solidified Hindenburg and Ludendorff's power base and created a rival headquarters, which spent much of its time petitioning for more manpower and questioning Falkenhayn's prioritization of the Western Front. When Ludendorff returned from Berlin, he spoke with Hindenburg and they agreed that a defensive posture, against such a numerous opponent, was unwise and they must return to the offensive. Utilizing Germany's superior railway network, they planned to redeploy Ninth Army to the north, concentrating around the towns of Posen and Thorn, before pushing off southeast towards Lodz, catching the Russian Second and Fifth Armies in the flank. Once again they petitioned Falkenhayn for reserves, emphasizing German weakness as well as the deteriorating reliability of their allies. 'Impressions of the Austrians are becoming increasingly unfavourable', Ludendorff noted in a telegram on 9 November. 'They are worryingly backward-looking. Resistance north of Krakow by the Austrian First Army is estimated at one day. The German eastern army is too weak to bring about a decision on its own. It can only count on partial success. I cannot overlook the situation in the west. If the decision is not made there soon, I would urge you to consider seeking a

decision here and freeing up three to four active corps for the east.' He followed it up with a more detailed report several days later: 'The Austrian officer assigned to *OberOst* was just with me and painted a desperate picture of the situation within the Austrian army and in Vienna. The Emperor [Franz Joseph] does not appear to have been informed of anything so far. The Austrian officer fears hasty decisions. There is talk of the cession of Galicia as a means of making peace. General Conrad is being heavily plotted against, but there is no one else suitable.'[38]

The October offensive only provided a temporary reprieve for the Habsburg Empire. As German troops headed for their own border, the full weight of Russian power was directed against Conrad's battered armies. Conrad initially proposed that Dankl's First Army would let the Russians cross at Ivangorod and then march north, catching them in the flank, but the weight of enemy numbers proved too great. By 25 October, seventeen Russian divisions were facing just nine German and Austrian divisions, forcing Dankl's army back in disorder. 'The shock of it shook my very soul', Dankl wrote to his wife. 'I had to summon every ounce of reason to make the decision to retreat. Despite all the cajoling from those around me, I remained in situ for one day in the hope that the situation would improve, then it was no longer viable; the Germans had already retreated, and we had to do the same . . .' Although they had taken in the region of 12,000 prisoners – a figure that Conrad confidently reported to the Emperor – the campaign was another costly one. First Army had lost some 40,000–50,000 casualties and embarked upon yet another gruelling retreat.[39]

As the Austrians began to withdraw, the question of what to do with Przemyśl returned. The man whose troops had originally relieved the fortress, General Svetozar Boroević, wanted to order an evacuation as soon as possible, but Conrad refused. Tales of great heroism were already circulating across the empire, and the story of how a valiant band of *Landsturm* men had managed to hold on to the fortress against overwhelming odds provided a much-needed morale boost at a time of great crisis and convinced Conrad that it could not be abandoned. But such stirring heroism could not disguise the huge

risk that Conrad was taking. Because it had not been possible to restock the garrison's supplies (the main rail links into the city still being cut), there would need to be very careful management of its remaining food stocks if the fortress was not to be starved into submission. On 2 November, Conrad issued an order to the garrison that they must prepare for another siege: 'I have confidence that the fortress, which was heroically and successfully defended during the first siege, will not only withstand all attacks in future, but also attract considerable enemy forces.'[40]

With the retreat of German and Habsburg armies, the atmosphere at *Stavka* became increasingly positive. Although their advance gradually ground to a halt amid the autumn rains, Russian divisions were now deployed in a great arc from the borders of East Prussia to Plotsk, Lodz and then down to Tarnów, leaving them within sixty miles of the German border and just a hundred miles from Krakow. On 22 October, N. A. Kudashev, the representative of the Foreign Ministry at *Stavka*, reported on the spirit of the men, which had been 'much more optimistic than last week':

> Our success at Warsaw, Ivangorod and in fact along the entire front line encouraged headquarters. However, as with our previous successes, the first news was exaggerated: General Danilov insisted on notifying our representatives in France and England immediately. Meanwhile, it is now becoming apparent that the Germans did not suffer a crushing defeat. They only began to retreat in a hurry once they noticed superior enemy forces ahead of them. Of course, we should be grateful and thank God even for this turn of events. But we can only speak of victory over the Germans once they are hastily retreating across their own territory.[41]

The invasion of Germany was scheduled to begin on 14 November. General Yanushkevich issued new orders on 2 November: 'The ultimate goal towards which we should exert every effort is *the invasion of Germany*, and the major part of our armies should presumably be directed between the Vistula and the Sudetenland.' First, the Northwest Front was charged with 'breaking down the stubborn resistance of the Germans in East Prussia', with one army 'driving

them back behind the line of the Masurian Lakes' and another 'gaining a foothold in the lower Vistula'. Second, the 'next immediate task' for the Southwest Front was 'to gain decisive advantage over the Austrians in Galicia and push them back to the west'. It would make 'powerful offensive blows' on both flanks and thus allow the main offensive to proceed.[42]

Once again, Russian plans would be undone by the speed with which Germany could act. Mackensen struck again on 11 November, having managed to re-form his forces, incorporate replacements and redeploy them all within a fortnight; what one commentator judged to be a 'masterpiece of organisation'.[43] Five corps were pushed through a narrow sector on the left of the Russian Second Army around Kutno, their left and right flanks screened by the Vistula and Warta rivers. The Germans quickly punched a hole in the line, with cavalry galloping off to spread chaos in the Russian rear and causing a flurry of confused messages to arrive at Ruzski's headquarters. Initially, Ruzski was unimpressed by the German advance and warned his army commanders not to be distracted but to continue their preparations for the invasion of Germany. So Mackensen kept going, using his artillery to batter Russian positions and then advance rapidly on Lodz – 'the Manchester of Poland', known for its mills and factories. Within two days, they had taken 20,000 prisoners and shocked the bewildered defenders with their speed and power; threatening to separate the First and Second Russian Armies and unhinge their entire position in Poland.[44]

And then something unexpected happened: the Russians moved. General Pavel Plehve, commander of Fifth Army, deployed to the south around Tomaschow, reacted quickly to the looming threat of envelopment. Refusing to be cowed by Mackensen's reputation, he ordered his men to march north, ensuring that they would not be cut off and at the same time placing the Germans in serious danger. Plehve did not look like a general. He had none of the dash and charisma of a Rennenkampf and none of the gravitas of the Grand Duke. He was 'an old man of small stature', his shoulders stooped, his mind seemingly immersed in details, a pedant. But his actions saved Russian forces from a second Tannenberg. Months later, an

anecdote surfaced about how Plehve had reacted when an aide from General Sergei Scheidemann (Samsonov's replacement) had galloped up, out of breath, and told him that Second Army was surrounded and had to surrender. 'Plehve silently gazed at the young man for a couple of seconds from under his thick, furrowed eyebrows and then said: "My dear fellow, are you here to play a tragedy or to give a report? If you have a report, then you should provide it to the chief of staff, but remember, no tragedies, or else I shall put you under arrest."'[45]

Covering over forty miles in two days, Plehve's men took up a strong position southeast of Lodz, where they were able to make a defensive stand. Furious German attacks were launched against the Russian lines as Mackensen tried to get around them. He ordered General Reinhard von Scheffer-Boyadel's XXV Reserve Corps to push on to the town of Brzeziny, from where they could encircle Russian forces around Lodz, only to find Plehve's men in his way. At the same time, Ruzski finally ordered a corps from Rennenkampf's First Army to march west from Warsaw, which struck the German rear on 21 November and threatened to cut Scheffer-Boyadel's troops off from the rest of the army. For a moment, it seemed as if the Germans would themselves be threatened with a battle of encirclement. This chaotic, confusing series of manoeuvres, two great foes grappling with one another, slipping and sliding, continued for days with spiralling casualties. 'We are on a razor-edge', noted a German staff officer. 'We are standing firm on three fronts near Warsaw – but we have too few men. My nerves were worn out. Five nights' suspense is too much – one cannot keep it up.'[46]

Despite the complicated situation, enough information had got through to *Stavka* to suggest that a great victory might be possible. As Danilov noted, 'Russian hearts were beating in anxious expectation of revenge for the "Samsonov" tragedy'. On 24 November, the Russian High Command ordered seventeen trains to be sent to Warsaw to house an estimated 20,000 prisoners that were going to be captured.[47] However, Scheffer-Boyadel, a reliable and unflappable soldier who had recently come out of retirement, managed to cut his way out of the encirclement and march north to rejoin the rest of

Ninth Army, which then pulled back. The German troops, many of whom were inexperienced reservists, had shown an astonishing degree of cohesion and courage under the most terrible conditions. 'The performance of the troops exceeds anything that had hitherto been thought possible,' Mackensen wrote on 30 November, 'but the battle is tremendously gruelling and grave due to the sheer mass of the enemy, the unbelievable condition of the roads and the prevailing weather conditions. It is all very well for folks at home in the alehouse or the school yard to talk of triumph and glory. But when you are grappling for victory with a dogged and powerful enemy, entrenched to the teeth, it is a very different story.'[48]

With Scheffer-Boyadel's corps managing to fight their way out to the north, the possibility that Russia could win a late victory on the Eastern Front evaporated. Yet the Russian divisions could not have done much more. Having fired off thousands of shells, most of which could not be replaced, they found their fighting power rapidly tailing off after several days of heavy fighting, leaving their men at the mercy of the better-equipped German forces. Casualties were also correspondingly severe. Fifty-fifth Division, part of First Army, arrived in Warsaw on 20 November and was sent straight into battle. Within ten days it had almost ceased to exist, having lost three quarters of its soldiers and most of its officers, including three regimental commanders.[49]

The battlefield around Lodz had now become a bitterly contested zone of hastily dug trenches, shell holes, dead men and horses. Burning villages turned the sky red, while palls of smoke gave the landscape a hellish atmosphere. Conditions were deteriorating rapidly. Although the weather was not as wet as it had been in October, which helped prevent the worst of the mud, mornings were bitterly cold and hard frosts made it increasingly difficult to dig in. A Russian newspaper correspondent, writing for *Bourse Gazette*, found himself in the village of Lowicz soon after it had been abandoned. 'The struggle here represented the attack of an enemy at bay', he noted. 'The trenches were filled with corpses.' After dark, the roads around the town became congested with troops. 'Past us swung unit after unit, and endless artillery parks and steaming camp kitchens . . . The snow slowly fell

on the black pits dug by shells and on the grey mass of soldiers, pow-dering the fresh corpses of men who had wandered God knows whence. In the local square of the town were burning bonfires, about which soldiers were playing like huge black shadows.'[50]

Neither side had won a decisive victory at Lodz, although the broad aim of the German attack, to stop a Russian invasion of Silesia, had been accomplished. The Germans had also demonstrated, yet again, their skills in offensive warfare, in attacking and moving quickly, which made them extremely difficult to stop. But larger strategic issues were still unresolved and the friction between OHL and *OberOst* only worsened as the Lodz operation came to an end. Hindenburg and Ludendorff's hopes that Falkenhayn could be pressurized into releasing sizeable reinforcements for the Eastern Front were dashed on the evening of 26 November when a wire informed them that five divisions were being detrained to the east, with two more to follow soon. While this might have been interpreted as a positive development, Falkenhayn poured cold water on the idea that it was a precursor to a wider realignment. 'According to the decision of His Majesty, we cannot count upon further reinforcements, since there is no value in gaining victories in the east if they come at the expense of our position in the west.' In a tense telephone conversation with Falkenhayn, Ludendorff 'had to let off some steam' and complained about what he saw as the tardy arrival of reserves and the 'lack of clarity' from OHL, which meant that they could only remain on the defensive.[51]

Falkenhayn was not yet ready to admit that Ludendorff might have a point. By mid-November, his great push in Flanders had ended in disappointment. Despite coming tantalizingly close to a breakthrough, enough French, British and Belgian troops had joined the battle to hold on to their lines at Ypres, leaving the entire Western Front deadlocked. There was now a line of trenches running from the Channel coast to the border of Switzerland and it was unclear whether such defensive positions could be broken without extortionate levels of blood (Germany had lost upwards of 80,000 men killed, wounded or missing in the Flanders fighting).[52] With this in mind, Falkenhayn pressed *OberOst* to continue its attacks. Writing to Hindenburg, he insisted that 'The success of the war now depends upon the offensive in northern Poland not petering out and becoming a war of position as it is here in the west.' Moreover, he pointed out possible mistakes in *OberOst*'s deployment of divisions and repeated his expectation that it would continue the offensive 'at all costs'.

A soldier as experienced as Hindenburg was not minded to take lessons on operations from a mere lieutenant-general. He lost no time in writing to the Kaiser complaining about what he perceived to be criticism directed against himself, and instead attempted to place the blame for any disappointments on Falkenhayn. He explained that he had told Falkenhayn that the decisive result 'would be achieved in northern Poland' and had requested urgent reinforcements, which only arrived 'gradually and with delay'. He also had to reckon with 'the constantly fluctuating decisions of the Austrian Army Command and the inferiority of the Austrian army'.[53] The Kaiser visited *OberOst*'s headquarters at Posen several days later and was in a forgiving mood. Although he still retained faith in Falkenhayn, he promoted Hindenburg to field marshal and Ludendorff to lieutenant-general, and presented Mackensen with a well-deserved *Pour le Mérite*. There were also warm words for the command team in the east, which had achieved great things and 'still enjoyed his full confidence'. Privately, the Kaiser bristled at Hindenburg's insubordination and looked in disdain at Ludendorff's rough impetuosity, which he put down to his low birth. He was a 'dubious character', thought the Kaiser; a man 'eaten away by personal ambition. What great things is he supposed to have accomplished?' Yet he could not dispense with these men, such was the power of their reputations won on the field of Tannenberg, so he was left to grumble to his courtiers in moments of quiet frustration.[54]

4. 'Not a battle but a slaughter!'

Western journalists liked to comfort their readers back home with tales of how smoothly Russia was managing the war. An American, Stanley Washburn, 'Special Correspondent with the Russian armies' for the London *Times*, was granted permission to visit *Stavka* in mid-October and was keen to highlight the great professionalism and skill he found there. Baranovichi was not particularly impressive ('one might easily imagine oneself in Western Canada'), but Washburn was struck by the importance of a location from where a 'single individual' commanded 'the largest army that has ever been mustered in the field of war'. After being taken through a grove of poplar and pine trees, he reached a siding where he was presented to the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich. 'He is a huge man of certainly 6 ft. 4 in., and impresses one greatly by his absolute lack of affectation and his simplicity . . . His dress and mien were as simple as that of any of his numerous aides. His expression was that of a serious, sober man giving his entire thought and effort to a task the importance of which he thoroughly realized.'[1]

After meeting the Grand Duke, Washburn went to the dining car to be served lunch. Once a part of the Nord Express, which ran from Berlin to St Petersburg, the carriage had now been converted to wartime use. Maps and orders plastered the walls, and three times a day headquarters staff would crowd inside to eat, 'each intent on hurrying through his meal and taking up the task that absorbs every waking hour'. Food was simple Russian fare. Orders had been issued prohibiting the drinking of spirits, particularly vodka, and the Grand Duke only permitted white wine or claret to be served at meal times. 'I think it may be taken as a positive fact that there was never a more clear-headed or more sober army in the field than that which is now facing the hordes of the Teutons at this present moment.' Such positive testimony helped to maintain Allied morale as the war went into its first winter. The great hopes that had been invested in the Russian 'steamroller' had been seriously undermined by the disaster at Tannenberg and the failure to draw more German forces east. Despite the outward appearance of efficiency and dedication that the Grand Duke was always eager to foster, the Russian war effort was already struggling by the autumn of 1914.

On 29 November, a meeting of senior generals was held at Siedlice, fifty miles east of Warsaw. 'The purpose of the meeting was to ascertain the condition of the army, which had long been a matter of great concern to headquarters', noted Danilov, who delivered a sobering report that day. After four months of uninterrupted fighting, the Russian Army was in urgent need of reinforcement and replenishment. He was particularly aggrieved by the losses of officers, with many battalions now unable to field more than a third of their full complement:

> From the very first days of the war, our officer corps has shown outstanding grit and unparalleled bravery; the consequence being that it was mowed down in droves. The order that officers should be deployed economically had unfortunately been issued far too late, and in the early days, companies entering battle had three or four officers in their ranks, and often active ones. The striking difference between the uniform and armament of the soldier and that of the officer made the latter a clearly identifiable target for enemy riflemen, who saw their primary task as being to shoot our officers down first. In order to counteract this danger, it was later decided to replace the shiny metal epaulettes with fabric ones, and to replace sabres with rifles.

A shortage of officers was not the only problem. By the end of 1914, a serious crisis was brewing across the infantry. During the fighting around Lodz, some battalions were down to a third of their normal complement of manpower, while even in Galicia – the scene of Russia's great triumphs of 1914 – Third Army was reporting regiments down to 1,200 men, barely half strength.[2]

The deficiencies that Danilov outlined were part of a series of chronic problems that affected all aspects of Russia's war effort. On

the outbreak of war, Russia had 4.5 million rifles (mainly the bolt-action 7.62 mm Moisin-Nagant), but these were almost all handed out upon mobilization, leaving her depots empty. With the capability to produce just 60,000 per month, there was no chance that the growing shortfalls could be addressed. By as early as November 1914, up to 800,000 men were being held back because they could not be sent to the front without rifles. Perhaps even more critical was the shortage of shells for the field artillery (Russia had little heavy artillery to speak of). This had been noticed as early as August 1914, but by the final weeks of the year, the inability to produce enough rounds for her field guns was having a devastating effect on Russia's operations, demoralizing the infantry and contributing to a growing sense of depression among the officer corps. After the heavy fighting in Galicia in late September, General Ivanov had reported that there were only about 25 shells per gun left in his inventories. Although *Stavka* had repeatedly requested that supplies be used 'as sparingly as possible', complaints about a lack of ammunition only grew more persistent with each passing month.[3]

None of these deficiencies could be corrected in the short term. Little help could be expected from Russia's allies, who were undergoing their own supply difficulties after finding peacetime estimates of wartime consumption to be fantastically inaccurate. With London and Paris placing as many orders as possible with American arms producers, Russia found herself shut out of potential suppliers, and even though Japan promised to help, it would be months before these deliveries arrived. This isolation was compounded by the entry of the Ottoman Empire into the war on 29 October. The narrow waterway of the Dardanelles Straits, linking the Mediterranean with the Sea of Marmara, had been closed since late September, but with the war party having finally triumphed in Constantinople, Turkey launched a surprise naval raid on Odessa. Sending two requisitioned German dreadnoughts into the Black Sea to bombard the port, the Turks damaged oil storage facilities and sowed mines in the surrounding waters. The Russian response was swift and unequivocal. The following day, 1 November, the Tsar declared war, announcing that 'Turkey's reckless intervention in the present conflict' would

only 'accelerate her submission to fate and open up Russia's path towards the realization of the historic task of her ancestors along the shores of the Black Sea'.[4]

At Siedlice, Danilov's report was received by the grey-faced generals in silence. When he recommended that they look to a renewed conquest of East Prussia to eliminate the danger on their right flank, there was little enthusiasm. Both Ruzski and Ivanov saw the advantages that control of this province would bring, but they struck a decidedly pessimistic attitude. Ruzski pointed to his lack of manpower and shortages of ammunition, as well as to the fact that he was having to cope with heavy counter-attacks from German units recently moved over from the Western Front. For his part, Ivanov noted that the enemy defences around Krakow were very tough – and he was already receiving reports of growing Habsburg forces at the passes through the Carpathians.[5]

The Grand Duke was never the most decisive of men, and in the face of such caution he did little to lift this counsel of despair. Writing to the Tsar on 30 November, he noted how Russian units had become 'extremely weakened' by the heavy fighting of recent weeks, even citing one division that had been reduced to barely 15 officers and 2,000 other ranks. The situation on the left bank of the Vistula was 'extremely risky', with the Germans confronting General Ruzski 'along the whole front line, while making attempts to break through our position with attacks on Lowicz and aiming to surround our left flank'. As for the Southwest Front, Ivanov had reported that 'his armies were significantly reduced in number, firearms were running out, and although we continue to achieve local successes over the Austrians, it is impossible to count upon a complete victory over them in the next few days'. Therefore, the armies of the Northwest Front would begin a short withdrawal 'to improve their strategic position'. There was not only a crisis of equipment and manpower in the Tsar's armies, but also a crisis of confidence.[6]

Another meeting was held on 13 December, when the true scale of these shortages became apparent. The shortfall in officers and men throughout the Northwest Front was already well established. On average, battalions were down to 300 men (about a third of their

establishment), with a 'great shortage' of rifle cartridges and field artillery shells. *Stavka* estimated that the armies at the front needed half a million pairs of boots, but the Chief Supply Officer reported that there were only 40,000 pairs in stock. More had been ordered, but it was unclear when they would arrive. It was a similarly depressing situation along the Southwest Front. The forward battalions urgently needed more horseshoes, boots and winter clothing, while a lack of rifles meant that only half of the replacements sent to the front could be issued a weapon. Given these problems, both Ivanov and Ruzski repeated their belief that no broad offensive activity could be contemplated in the near future. There was, therefore, only one option to take: to halt all attacks and wait for resupply. There would be no further talk of invading Germany.[7]

Following up the Russian retreat, German troops marched into Lodz on 6 December, completing the push that had begun a month earlier and further enhancing the reputation of one of Germany's leading soldiers on the Eastern Front. Often photographed in the uniform of the Death's Head Hussars, with its skull and crossbones emblem on the fur busby, August von Mackensen was now a national hero, easily recognizable by his craggy face, thick eyebrows and fierce moustache. 'Today I was in Lodz', Mackensen wrote on 7 December, 'and on the hills that lie to the east . . . Lodz has suffered less than I expected. The Russians have experienced significant losses. The battlefield has not yet been cleared. The whole area has been churned up by the Russians' field fortifications; they will soon be found somewhere new. But Lodz remains a great success for us.' Since the beginning of the November offensive, his army had taken over 100,000 prisoners. 'The Russians are inexhaustible only in number', he added. 'In fact, they are growing rather than decreasing in number. But they are not getting any better, because they are bringing men with practically no training into battle. I really do have the impression now that they are starting to get worn down.'[8]

While Germany looked to the future in the east with growing confidence, Austria–Hungary limped on with painful steps. On 6 November, AOK had moved to Teschen, ninety miles to the west of

Neu-Sandec, taking up residence in a local school. The location may have been new, but familiar problems quickly arose. Przemyśl had been abandoned in early November, leaving Conrad to dream up a series of ambitious counter-offensives that would relieve the garrison, restore his fortunes and ensure his future happiness. With the loss of his son, he leant even more heavily upon Virginia ('Gina') von Reininghaus, the 35-year-old wife of a prominent Austrian businessman. He had met the young mother in 1907, two years after his first wife had passed away, and was enraptured with her, bombarding her with letters almost daily, pouring out his frustrations and telling her that she must divorce her husband and marry him. Although she had initially rebuffed his advances, by the end of 1908 they had embarked upon a public romance, with Gina's husband, Hans, content to turn a blind eye to his wife's infidelity with such a powerful, well-connected individual.[9]

Since the outbreak of the war, Conrad's reliance upon Gina for emotional support had only become more noticeable. Soon after he had left for the front, she had sent him a medallion bearing the portrait of Helmuth von Moltke, the general who had led Prussia's armies in the wars of 1866 and 1870–71, and whom Conrad idolized. Wearing the medallion around his neck, he could only contrast the victories that Moltke had won with his own struggles. 'Today is a day of worrying tension', he wrote on 29 August at the height of the fighting in Galicia. 'The two battles continue, as is the nature of today's battles, which are no longer decided in one day as they used to be, the struggle lasting instead for days on end . . .' When he received the 'exquisite medal', he asked what he had done to deserve it: 'Especially now, when we have not yet had a resounding success! You know how I feel in such cases; I was somewhat embarrassed. You can probably see from every one of my letters how much I am always with you in my thoughts, despite the grave worries of this serious time.'[10]

Conrad was cheered by the success of a counter-offensive launched on 3 December, which forced the Russian Third Army away from the important fortress city of Krakow. The Battle of Limanowa-Lapanów would, in retrospect, be his masterpiece; a bold manoeuvre that he likened to 'a masterful game of chess'.[11] After spotting a gap

between two advancing Russian armies, he ordered a counter-attack into the Russian flank. It had rained heavily and the mud was knee-deep, but the Austrians hurled themselves forward with desperate courage. 'There were fierce battles fought near Krakow', remembered the squadron commander of 2 Riga Dragoon Regiment. 'The valorous Russian Army suffered very heavy losses. Every day, one could see coffins of officers being carried towards the Tarnów railway station by the relatives of the dead, so that they could be committed to the earth back in Russia.'[12]

While Conrad basked in the warm glow of Limanowa-Lapanów, news of another disaster in the Balkans came 'like a sudden clap of thunder'.[13] The brutal struggle for possession of Serbia had been going on since mid-September. Habsburg troops had gradually clawed their way into the country over the next two months, pushing forward against increasingly exhausted Serbian forces and seizing Valjevo on 15 November. Two days later, as Austrian troops reached the Kolubara river, Potiorek informed Vienna that there was no indication that the Serbs 'intended to offer resistance' along the river line, so he intended to press matters to a conclusion. After two or three days' rest, his men would move into Belgrade to help clear up the increasingly stretched supply lines. Then they would mount a general offensive to the southeast, towards Arangjelovac and then on to the Serbian base at Kragujevac. The Austrian Military Attaché in Sofia reported that there were only sparse rearguards covering the Serbian line of retreat, and it was known that the Serbian Government had despatched a report to Paris warning that the end was approaching.[14] On the day that Valjevo had fallen, Potiorek wrote to Arthur von Bolfras, informing him that 'all sections of both armies are being driven forward in immediate, unrelenting pursuit, in order to exploit the victories to the greatest possible extent, as long as troops have just enough strength to push on'.[15]

Despite Potiorek's bullishness, the campaign remained in the balance. His forces were desperately tired and at the end of long and vulnerable supply routes. Since September, the two Habsburg armies in Serbia had sustained upwards of 130,000 casualties and the survivors struggled on across a landscape that was waterlogged and deep

in mud.[16] By the end of November, Austrian units along the Kolubara were in no condition to continue operations, dependent upon a single, heavily burdened road from Sabac. 'The men were in a deplorable state', recorded one account: 'no underwear, ridden with lice, their clothes tattered, their shoes – if they still had any – torn to shreds and held together with makeshift repairs of string and rags, in spite of which their feet, blue with cold, were still exposed in many places.' Men had gone weeks without bread or salt, sometimes without food for days at a time. When food did arrive, it usually consisted of boiled pork with some maize, often leaving the men still hungry and prone to growing rates of sickness.[17]

The mood in the Serbian camp was almost as bad. After the euphoria of August, when they had turned back the first invasion, the fighting throughout September and October had become a sapping, attritional struggle that the Serbian Army was ill suited for. Austrian advantages in firepower became increasingly apparent every week as more guns and heavier-calibre weapons were sent to Potiorek's army group. By September, some Serbian divisions were losing 100 men every day to shellfire, and such an unequal contest provoked a rising flood of desertions. Lacking the numbers of guns or shells to engage in long counter-battery duels, Serbian artillery could only be employed in dire emergencies, leaving their infantry, for the most part, on their own. The situation became so bad that General Stepa Stepanović, commander of Second Army, sent in his resignation on 24 October after complaining about the lack of shells. His superior, Putnik, would not countenance letting one of his most important soldiers go and ordered him to remain at his post.

'So tell me, who's going to lead?' Putnik asked.

'There will be someone,' Stepanović replied, 'but I can't do it any more.'

'Do what you can and as much as you can, and no one can blame you for anything you can't do . . . If we lack artillery, we have to resist with rifles alone, just so we don't let the damn Swabians go', Putnik added. 'Courage, my friend, courage.'

'I have never lacked courage,' Stepanović responded, 'but give me the means to fight.'[18]

Retreat was inevitable. Putnik authorized a withdrawal at the end of October, with Serbian forces pulling back to a new, shorter defensive perimeter between Mount Cer and Mišar. But even this line could not be held, and after another Austrian offensive, he had no choice but to abandon Belgrade and take up position along the eastern bank of the Kolubara. His health remained fragile, with his emphysema leaving him struggling for breath, but he had not given up hope of restoring Serbian fortunes. By late November, he had crafted a daring counter-offensive that would take advantage of Austrian disorganization and throw them back across the river. Crucially, the Serbs had managed to rush through a consignment of French ammunition from the port of Salonika, which was shuttled northwards to the town of Niš. Being of French manufacture, the shells were slightly too long for Serb artillery, which meant that they had to be individually reassembled and then dispatched to the front. In what was a feat of remarkable improvisation, by the final days of November, 11,000 shells had been brought into the Serb camp and issued to its batteries, giving Putnik's forces a priceless opportunity to go onto the offensive.[19]

Putnik put everything he had into the attack. Totalling about 215,000 men and 400 guns, the Serbian Army was outnumbered, but it had the advantage of surprise and of concentration of force.[20] It would also have the presence of Peter Karađorđević, King Peter I of Serbia. He was not a particularly imposing man, of average height with an awkward, stiff gait, owing to persistent rheumatism, but he wanted to see his men and visited the Serbian positions shortly before the attack. His face, notable for his long white moustache, was 'marked by sadness'. Walking through the Serb lines, snow falling on his cap, he looked at the anxious troops, young boys and old men, who crouched in their muddy trenches.

'My children, I have learned that some among your number tire of fighting and have decided to surrender', he said. 'Let them! But I shall stay.'

It would be victory or death. An observer noted how the Serbs had never fought with such a 'burning desire to win'. 'Each of them felt his soul gripped with a furious desire to seize victory or to die for

their *Chicha* [old man or uncle], who had so graciously appeared among them, heedless of the distance and fatigue and in spite of his failing health, and who had stayed there among his soldiers – his children – in the blinding extravaganza of battle, as the cannons roared and the bullets whistled . . .'[21]

The long-awaited counter-offensive began on 3 December. Putnik's orders were clear: 'In view of the enemy's difficulties in terms of food, supplies and physical exhaustion, and to both take advantage of this moment of weakness and raise the morale and spirit of our troops, I command that tomorrow, 3 December, all three armies will attack the enemy on all fronts and force them to retreat.'[22] It was a foggy morning, the ground coated with snow, when the Serbian bombardment barked into life. Major General Franz Kalser, commander of 50th Infantry Division, which faced the brunt of the attack on the over-extended Austrian right flank, could only bemoan the terrible state of his brigades, which broke and fled under the sudden violence of the shelling: 'The decimated troops, worn down by constant fighting, with no shoes and often the artillery with little ammunition, cannot withstand the ferocious attacks of the rested Serbs, reinforced by recruits. At 1 o'clock in the morning, the retreat begins in full order . . . the troops retreating in bright moonlight over the snow-covered fields of this magnificent mountain region. With every step the men take, they stumble across yet another carcass of a fallen horse.'[23]

Potiorek still hoped to renew his own attack, but the deteriorating situation in the south soon forced him to abandon any idea of an offensive. Heavy fighting continued up and down the line, with Serb forces attacking through the darkness. 'In this surging back and forth in the pitch-black night, in the roar of the charging troops, in the overwhelming din of the rifle and machine-gun fire and the exploding hand grenades, it turned midnight', remembered one Habsburg officer. 'As the witching hour began, the regiment's losses started to peak. Field officers fell, corporals and soldiers collapsed in a record number of dead or wounded; people lost their minds and committed acts they would never normally have been capable of; machine guns gave up the ghost. To put it bluntly: "It was not a battle but a

slaughter!"[24] Austrian morale, always fragile, now began to disintegrate. After several days of fierce fighting, Habsburg forces all along the Kolubara started to break, streaming back along crowded roads, while Belgrade – the crowning achievement of Potiorek's campaign – was abandoned on 15 December, with jubilant Serb troops cheering through the streets.

Potiorek had reached the end of the line. He crossed the Sava on 11 December, defeat etched on his face, and was presented with a telegram from Vienna ordering him to explain, in writing, the reasons for the great reversal. In a letter to Bolfras, he admitted that the withdrawal was a 'major setback', and blamed a lack of resources:

> This tragic reversal of fate was exclusively because of the growing disproportion of the forces. All the higher commanders at the front and the troops did their duty to the fullest. But the enemy has recently filled its ranks, while persistent fighting and insufficient replacements have meant that some of ours have even dropped below peacetime levels. Thus, our troops finally had to yield to the overwhelming enemy majority and – mainly due to the poor terrain – they unfortunately lost a vast number of guns, etc. during their retreat. I say frankly and unreservedly that this retreat is a major setback of an extremely delicate nature. However, if we keep our heads held high, we can and will make up for it . . . This is probably the saddest letter I have had to write since the war began. But once again: I am convinced that everything can be made good again, but now we need men, guns and ammunition.[25]

Potiorek was sacked soon after his return to Austria. In the cold, bureaucratic and purely functional style that he had become notorious for, he penned a short diary entry on the day he was dismissed: 'I shall therefore not be granted the opportunity of making good the misfortune myself, and it will remain associated with my name.'[26] The assassin of Sarajevo had claimed another victim.

Serbia's triumph was a disaster for Austria–Hungary, sending a great rippling message of defeat through the Balkans. The miserable failure to subdue Serbia left Austria's standing in great doubt, as the other

powers in the region – Romania, Bulgaria and Italy – bided their time. All had, at one moment or another, considered entering the war, and they remained wary observers, carefully weighing up the odds and judging the likelihood of victory for the Central Powers. Although the situation in Galicia had been restored somewhat following Conrad's late victory at Limanowa-Lapanów, the collapse of the campaign against Serbia had, as one authority put it, 'a devastating effect on the entire monarchy'. Of the 12,000 officers and 450,000 other ranks who had fought in the Balkans, 273,000 had become casualties by Christmas; a sobering figure that could be divided into 28,000 dead, 122,000 wounded and 74,000 missing, with the rest suffering from a range of infectious diseases including typhus, dysentery and cholera.[27]

Habsburg losses were so heavy that the size of the army had shrunk dramatically since the opening days of the war. Vienna had been able to put about one and a half million men into the field in July 1914, with another 800,000 joining the colours over the following five months, but as 1914 came to an end, the combat strength of her armed forces had dwindled. With only a million men in total, there were just over 250,000 riflemen available for operations, leaving Conrad desperately short of manpower for the crucial task of relieving Przemyśl.[28] The city had been besieged for the second time in early November and the garrison endured a gloomy, shivering existence haunted by growing hunger. Careful management of food stocks and ruthless requisitioning of supplies allowed the city commander, Lieutenant-General Hermann Kusmanek, to keep the civilian population fed until March, but their ordeal worsened each week.

The Germans looked on unimpressed. The Kaiser had travelled to Wroclaw on 2 December for a meeting with Archduke Friedrich, Archduke Karl and Conrad to discuss joint strategy. 'During a talk held in our dining car, first General von Falkenhayn, and then Conrad, present their views on operations in the East', recorded one of the Kaiser's closest aides, Hans von Plessen. 'Both agree. Eventually, full unanimity is established. The Austrians came across as decidedly lacklustre . . . I get the impression that they cannot keep up with the speed of our troops during an attack.'[29] When Falkenhayn met Conrad at

the railway station at Oppeln in Silesia on 19 December, the differences in outlook were immediately apparent. Falkenhayn still had little interest in more ambitious operations on the Eastern Front and talked about the creation of a 'Chinese Wall' on the west bank of the Vistula, which would free up divisions for an offensive in France. Once again, Conrad suggested that they should attempt a major envelopment of Russian forces on both flanks, with a German thrust over the Narew towards Siedlice, only for Falkenhayn to brush the idea away. 'What about the west in the meantime?' he asked. 'If the German front were broken through there, all the victories against Russia would be of no use.'[30]

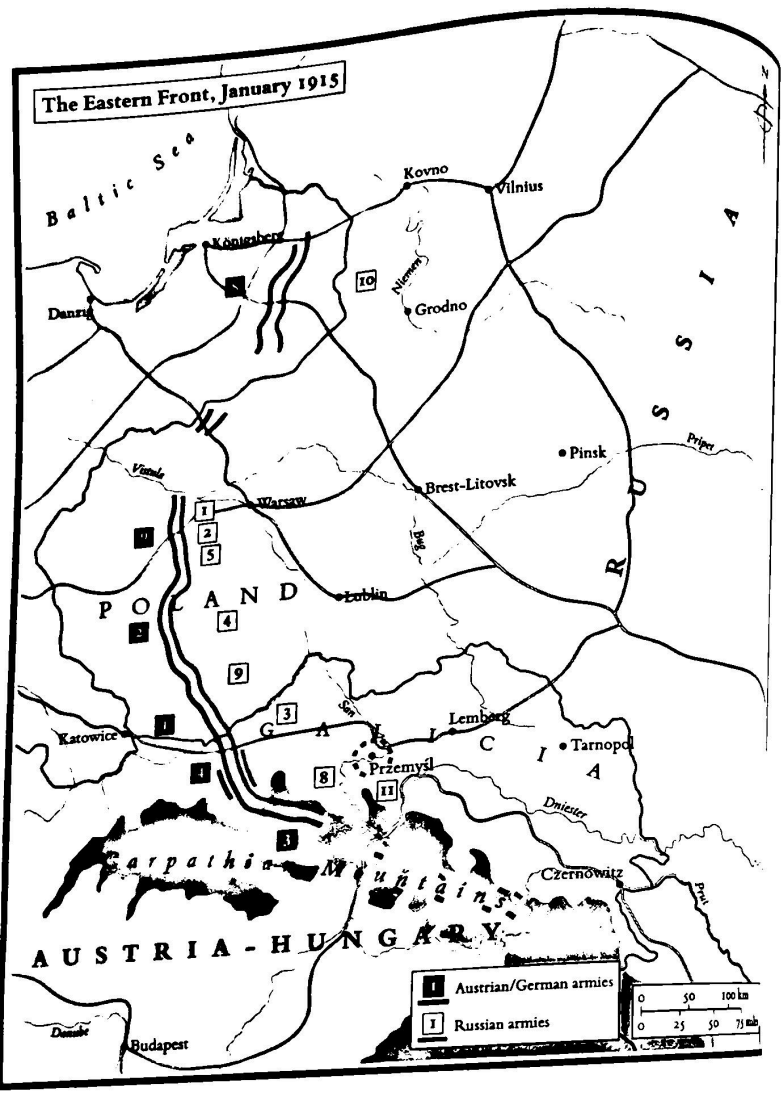
Conrad was haunted by the prospect of a separate Russo-German peace. When Captain Moritz Fleischmann, AOK's representative at *OberOst*, heard rumours that Berlin was considering making overtures to Petrograd, Conrad was aghast. 'They would conclude peace and leave us sitting in the pepper?' he asked incredulously, before sending an urgent telegram to Count Berchtold in Vienna. 'I should think that Germany, to whom we have proven so selfless an ally and whose territories we have preserved from enemy invasion for four full months under the greatest sacrifices, would not now in this difficult moment leave us in the lurch and thus unilaterally treat with our enemies to our harm.' But when Berchtold met with Germany's Foreign Minister, Gottlieb von Jagow, such concerns were waved away. Any peace would only be concluded based upon the 'complete liberation of East Prussia as well as Galicia from Russian control'. While Falkenhayn would not have been averse to a diplomatic manoeuvre that would free Germany from having to fight a war on two fronts, any attempt to make peace without significant annexations in the east would undoubtedly provoke fierce resistance from *OberOst* and the hardliners in Berlin.[31]

Falkenhayn may have been a detached observer of the Eastern Front, but the unreliability of his allies was a constant concern, threatening to drag German strength further away from the Western Front. Lieutenant-General Hugo von Freytag-Loringhoven, Germany's liaison officer at AOK, regularly updated OHL on the condition of the Habsburg Empire, and his reports did not make for pleasant

reading. In a telegram to Falkenhayn on 28 December, he noted that 'The major trouble with the Austro-Hungarian Army is currently its weakness in combat. Thus, the force of its attack, which was quite weak to begin with, has diminished entirely, even against Russian forces of equal number. In addition, the Carpathian terrain makes such weak forces even more ineffective.' Freytag-Loringhoven hoped that a new recruitment drive would bring Habsburg forces back up to full strength, but worried about what he called the 'less reliable nationalities', who were already abandoning the empire. 'The two retreats have not been without consequences; our confidence in victory has been compromised.'[32]

Conrad was committed to fighting on through the winter. After hearing that Germany had raised four new corps, he wrote to Falkenhayn and suggested that they be deployed in the east. He also told Hindenburg that he might be forced to move Second Army (then occupying the left of the Habsburg line south of Lodz) and use it to cover his increasingly threadbare right flank south of the Vistula. This ill-disguised threat to force Germany's hand provoked an immediate response from Falkenhayn, who demanded that Austrian forces remain where they were. When the two men met in Berlin on New Year's Day, Conrad pointed out that 'everything was deadlocked' in France and that success could only be achieved in the east. Ludendorff, who was in attendance, said that he would not object to the deployment of three or four German divisions with the Austro-Hungarian armies for their planned operations in the Carpathians; an offer that Conrad grasped immediately, stating that he would use these troops to relieve Second Army as he concentrated his forces for a push towards Przemyśl. But Falkenhayn was unmoved. Not only was the terrain very difficult, he said in his dry, unemotional tone, but the Russians could also take advantage of their interior lines to react to any offensive quickly and efficiently. The only option was another 'frontal attack in western Poland'.[33]

Conrad left Berlin in a dark mood, with the only positive being Ludendorff's helpful offer of three or four divisions. The Chief of Staff at *OberOst* had 'stood on our side', as Conrad explained in a letter to Gina; 'a determined individual' and the 'brains' and 'will' behind



Hindenburg, whom Conrad dismissed as an out-of-touch and ineffective old man.[34] While the duo of Hindenburg and Ludendorff were useful allies in the push to bring greater German resources onto the Eastern Front, Falkenhayn's refusal to commit more of his divisions meant that Austro-Hungary would continue to fight on in the darkest snow-bound depths of winter without a significant transfusion of German strength. By late December, Conrad had sketched out the rough outlines of a new offensive to drive north a hundred kilometres and relieve Przemyśl. It was an audacious, some would have said reckless, gamble. But Conrad saw the fate of the empire and that of his own life and career as now being indissolubly linked with the besieged fortress.

By January 1915, the Austro-Hungarian Army's long retreat had come to an end along the Carpathian Mountains, the great natural barrier that separated the Habsburg heartlands from the Galician plateau. It was a formidable obstacle, over 100 kilometres deep at its narrowest point and spanning 1,500 kilometres in a great arc that ran from the province of Moravia down to Romania. Austrian forces had retreated into this area after their early offensives had failed, fighting hard to maintain hold of the mountain passes in appalling conditions. Snow had fallen in November, and by the time Conrad returned to Teschen, his armies along the Carpathians were existing in a twilight world of swirling snowstorms, icy rain and sleet, which took its inevitable toll in the form of thousands of cases of frostbite, hypothermia and exposure.[35]

On paper, Conrad's plan had all the aggression and style he was known for, and the maps at AOK were marked up with great lines of advance in blue ink. General Boroević's Third Army would play the most important role: taking the direct northeasterly route towards Przemyśl. After breaking the Russian line, it would seize the towns of Lisko and Sanok, while forces would be sent to secure the railway junction at Ustrzyki Dolne. On its right would be the German-led *Südarmee* ('South Army'), commanded by General Alexander von Linsingen, which had been formed in early January and included three German divisions (the ones promised by Ludendorff). It would continue the attack and attempt to wheel north once it had

smashed through the Russian lines. Conrad massed 175,000 men and almost 1,000 guns along the sector of attack: 35 divisions for the central thrust (against 29 enemy divisions), with another nine and a half divisions (against nine divisions) extending the attack on the right.[36]

With only a slender superiority in manpower, Conrad was relying on surprise and the elan of his attacking infantry, sweeping down from the hills, to catch the Russians off guard. But the practical difficulties of moving and resupplying thousands of troops in a frozen wilderness were overwhelming, and the Habsburg Army, now little more than a militia, was in no state to achieve Conrad's ambitious goals. The offensive began on 23 January with Third Army struggling forward towards a series of crucial passes: the Dukla, Lupków, Rostoki, Uszok and Wyszkow – gateways to the open flat land that led to Przemyśl. One Austrian officer who served with his battalion along the bare Beskid Ridge was haunted by the experience: 'We entered into battle against an enemy that was overwhelmingly superior. Armed with spades and hoes, we had to dig ourselves into the stony, frozen-solid ground in order to be able to fend off this powerful foe. Icy blizzards conspired with the Russians against us and made life difficult for everyone. In flimsy coats and torn shoes, which at times also had paper soles, old and young had to huddle tightly against the slopes of the snow-covered, icy trenches.'[37]

The Habsburg troops pushed on with remarkable tenacity. The Uszok Pass was seized on 26 January, and although not all the surrounding heights were occupied, small detachments of Russian cavalry that had been left in place showed little fight. The weather remained the most formidable opponent. When *Südarmee* went forward, three days after General Boroević's men, violent snowstorms were still blowing across the battlefield. Pushing through thick, trackless forests covered in deep snowfall, Habsburg and German battalions were able to close with the Wyszkow Pass before taking Beskid railway station on 3 February – advancing, in places, over fifteen miles. But many field guns had to be abandoned, and only specialized mountain artillery, strapped onto sledges, could be taken off the roads. Infantry toiled at clearing snowdrifts, braving sub-zero

winds that left them on the verge of exposure. 'The icy wind whipped the frozen faces of our troops, covering them with a painful crust of ice and freezing the sweat that clung to their bodies from sheer exertion', recorded one account. 'The men were constantly having to step in for the faltering draft animals in order to move the sledges, which were loaded with machine-guns, mountain-guns, ammunition and military baggage.' There was no shelter, no warm food, and weapons had to be thawed out before they could be used.[38]

Both sides endured the same awful conditions in the Carpathians, but things never seemed quite so desperate for the Russians. With a better road and rail network on the northern side of the mountains, the Tsar's forces were more easily supplied and could be reinforced quickly in an emergency. Although there seemed little likelihood that the Russian hold on the Carpathians could be broken as easily as Conrad hoped, the scale of the Austrian attack was worrisome and brought into sharp focus the need for a clear Russian strategy over the coming months. On 24 January, General Ivanov telegraphed Yanushkevich at *Stavka* about the urgent need for reinforcements for the Southwest Front. The Austrian offensive had struck at 'a very sensitive and weakly occupied' sector of the line, and any success here might result in the lifting of the siege of Przemyśl. The positions occupied by his armies were 'poorly equipped to meet the enemy's blow; they are stretched; they can be easily circumvented; and they make it difficult for units to support each other'. In Ivanov's opinion, 'the most reliable course of action would be a decisive counter-attack'.[39]

Ivanov's telegram was not particularly welcome at Baranovichi. Approval had already been given for another offensive in the north with the newly formed Twelfth Army (scheduled for late February), and Danilov worried that sending more troops to Galicia would dilute Russian strength for what he regarded as their foremost operational priority – the occupation of East Prussia. He replied the following day, explaining that the situation was assessed 'somewhat differently' at the High Command and he did not think that a successful defence in the Carpathians required a counter-offensive. Yet the continuation of the Austrian attack (and the arrival of German

troops) worried the Grand Duke sufficiently that he ordered General Ruzski to send an infantry corps with five or six batteries of mountain artillery to bolster Ivanov's lines. When Ivanov travelled up to *Stavka* in early February, he again pressed his case for more reinforcements, arguing that the only way they would improve their situation 'was to throw the enemy down from the mountains' and invade Hungary. The Grand Duke, amenable as ever, thought this was sound strategy and approved, in principle, the idea of an offensive in the south as well as signing off on more resources as required.[40]

When Danilov heard about this change of heart, he became visibly frustrated, complaining to his aides about the failure to prioritize one sector of the front. He had already told the Grand Duke, as clearly as he could, that they were not in a position to land a decisive blow against both their opponents and they must choose one or the other, either Vienna–Budapest or Berlin. According to Danilov, the 'existence of two competing military assignments' was 'entirely condemnable' and 'resulted in a fragmentation of force and thus compromised the success of both undertakings'. 'This conflict of interests was undoubtedly caused by the aforementioned lack of organisation within the higher army administration, which resulted in *Stavka* – in its measures and decisions – being somewhat disconnected from the fronts, which consisted of a large number of troop units, and having to remotely manage operations from a great distance.' But the Grand Duke showed little interest in making a decisive intervention either way and let his front commanders do as they pleased, only intervening strongly when the mood took him – an inconsistent style of command that reflected the muddied strategic outlook in Petrograd over whether Germany or Austria should be Russia's main focus.[41]

Fighting continued in the Carpathians into February. After receiving XXII Corps from the Northwest Front, Ivanov ordered a major counter-offensive, which concentrated on the Dukla and Uszok passes. Encountering only exhausted, apathetic Austrian troops, General Brusilov's Eighth Army was able to regain much of the ground that had been lost. The situation deteriorated so rapidly that Conrad was forced to accept the transfer of a corps from the Balkans to bolster his thin line. Within two weeks, Boroević's Third Army had lost almost 89,000 men, about half its strength, mostly from illness and injury caused by the terrible conditions. Field Marshal Lieutenant von Kralowetz, Chief of Staff at X Corps, later complained that they had been defeated by the harsh winter weather. 'The enemy had not suffered anywhere near the same level of disruption. Their main forces – which had hitherto been withheld and preserved until the inevitable moment of weakness in the attacker – now launched a counter-attack, which came up against troops who were already decimated, feeble, frozen and defenceless . . .' Such an ambitious series of operations, he concluded, could only have been successful if those troops responsible for preparing the attacks, digging the forward positions and bringing up supplies were replaced by fresh troops beforehand, but this had not been insisted upon.[42]

The plight of the besieged garrison at Przemyśl was never far from Conrad's thoughts. Almost as soon as the first Carpathian offensive had broken down, he began planning another one, replacing General Boroević with General Böhm-Ermolli and bringing in Second Army to lead the attack. But hopes were already fading. On 10 February, General Kusmanek reported (in a wireless message to AOK) that if 3,500 of the garrison's horses were slaughtered immediately, food stocks could be stretched until mid-March, although this would affect the ability of the defenders to mount breakout operations. Two days later, on 12 February, AOK informed the Emperor that it was doubtful Przemyśl could be relieved in time. Franz Joseph received this news with deep sadness, before urging his commanders to push on and prevent the fall of the city at all costs.[43]

5. 'The agony of defence'

As Conrad's armies struggled in the Carpathians, Field Marshal Hindenburg laid down his instructions for a new offensive out of East Prussia. Two German armies, Eighth and Tenth, would attempt a double envelopment of the Russian Tenth Army, which occupied a thin slice of German territory from the Niemen river down to Johannisburg. It was an ambitious goal, nothing less than the destruction of an entire army, all the more so given that Hindenburg was relying upon newly formed corps to do it. To place such importance on young recruits was not ideal, so it was agreed to assign at least 300 veterans to each battalion, with another third being made up of *Ersatz* (reserve) troops that had already seen combat. *OberOst* was confident that this would give the new corps the best chance of fighting well in what promised to be a campaign of great difficulty, but also, potentially, significant rewards.[1]

The weather would be a formidable challenge. Hindenburg and Ludendorff had moved their headquarters forward to Insterburg, where blizzards had covered the railway tracks and roads with deep layers of snow, while the streets were reduced to 'mirror-smooth' surfaces of packed ice. With the telephone and telegraph network down, there was a necessary reliance upon wireless radio to send messages, which would be of crucial importance as German units attempted to coordinate their advance.[2] Troops were equipped with winter clothing, transport was placed on runners, and officers were briefed on the need to march as far as possible. 'The experience of Tannenberg and the Battle of the Masurian Lakes had shown us that a great and rapid success in battle was only to be obtained when the enemy was attacked on two sides', noted Ludendorff. 'Both our opponent's wings were weak. We could hope to gain a lot of ground before the enemy main forces could get away from our frontal attack. Both our thrusting wings were to surround the enemy – the earlier the better.'[3]

Ludendorff was sanguine about what might be achieved. 'How the whole operation will now turn out is difficult to say', he wrote in a letter to Moltke on 27 January:

> I am counting on a resounding victory in East Prussia and a slow retreat through the Carpathians. Whether or not this pressure will keep Russia east of the Vistula is questionable, but certainly possible. Only a firm push in the direction of Osowiec-Łomża could achieve more. Przemyśl can last until the end of February. And the Austrians are unlikely to arrive there either . . . I do not believe that a complete tactical overthrow of Russia is possible. The distances and sheer size of the country are too great for that. However, I do hope that we can achieve what we set out to achieve and overthrow the Russian Army.

As for Falkenhayn, Ludendorff thought that he had 'made a few slip ups' and that 'the Kaiser's confidence has been shaken'. He was hopeful that he 'will fall in the next attack'.[4]

Falkenhayn, as always, remained sceptical. The idea of fighting in the depths of winter did not appeal to the Chief of the General Staff, who entered 1915 in an ostensibly weaker position than ever before. On 16 January, the Kaiser had transferred the position of Minister of War (which Falkenhayn had held since 1913) to another Prussian officer (and court favourite), Adolph Wild von Hohenborn, while also decreeing that three recently raised corps, plus another regular corps drawn from the west, would be deployed on the Eastern Front.[5] Falkenhayn refused to let this affect his long-term strategic assessment of the importance of the war in the west. He spent most of his time at Charleville-Mézières in the Ardennes, chosen as the location of OHL because of its good links across the Western Front. The war in France and Belgium had now mutated into a new kind of conflict, a great siege of fortifications, trenches and barbed wire that grew more extensive each month. Heavy French attacks in Artois and Champagne continued through the winter, forcing a constant movement of divisions in and out of the line, which reduced Falkenhayn's ability to mass forces for any counter-offensive. On 7 January, he issued a decree to his army commanders in France stating that their aim was 'to fortify the positions in such a way that, if necessary, they could stand up to a

lengthy attack by large numbers of enemy forces, even when manned by very few of our own troops'. Only after this had been achieved would it be possible 'firstly, to allow those sections of the army that have retreated to make any real recovery and, secondly, to lend those sections of the army that remain strong . . . for use in special assignments, which – for obvious reasons – is absolutely essential'.[6]

Hindenburg's attack opened on 31 January with a feint by Mackensen's Ninth Army at Bolimov, a small village thirty-five miles west of Warsaw. Intending to fix Russian attention on Poland and distract them from the movement of reinforcements to the north, German troops attacked after firing off 18,000 shells filled with a mixture of TNT and xylyl bromide (a lachrymatory agent intended to irritate the eyes and cause choking). The decision to use such an unusual weapon had been taken after a number of officers, including the heavy-artillery expert at OHL, Max Bauer, had speculated about the prospect of employing gas as a solution to the problems of trench warfare. Unfortunately, the freezing cold seems to have prevented it from working effectively and the attackers ran into large numbers of Russian soldiers still capable of defending their trenches. Max Hoffmann, who climbed up to the belfry of Bolimov church to watch the attack, was unimpressed. 'I was a little disappointed . . .' he wrote. 'I had expected much greater results from the employment of this ammunition in – as we then imagined – such large quantities . . . The tactical success, with the exception of considerable losses that the Russians sustained in killed and wounded, was only a local improvement of our position'.[7]

Hindenburg and Ludendorff were hoping for much more than a 'local improvement'. The object of their operation was nothing less than the destruction of General F. V. Sivers' Tenth Army. Sivers was a 61-year-old Baltic German, appointed to army command in September 1914 and tasked with keeping the enemy busy and covering the communications to Petrograd. He had spent the autumn of 1914 launching a series of probing attacks into German territory, which left his army strung out in a thin line; about one under-strength battalion per kilometre in a patchwork of narrow trenches and ditches. 'There were gaps in the trenches along the line and they were very weak', recalled a company commander in one of the defending divisions; 'the barbed-wire fences were in as dire a state as they could be; but most importantly, our positions also passed through open, swampy lowland areas. The passages between the trenches were so shallow that in some stretches one had to crawl so as not to be shot by the Germans, and it was very difficult to dig any deeper into the frozen ground. At the same time, the Germans occupied the strongly fortified command position across the Angerap river, and could successfully fire at us almost everywhere.'[8]

With its flanks on either side largely unguarded, little depth to the defences, and no reserves in place, the Russian Tenth Army was in a highly vulnerable position. General Sivers recognized many of these deficiencies, but had no way of ameliorating them given his shortage of manpower, lack of engineering resources, and the great length of front he had to cover – over 160 miles. On 23 January, he warned General Ruzski, 'We must not forget that no-one can guarantee Tenth Army against the possible reoccurrence of the same manoeuvre that the Germans made against the army of General Rennenkampf – that is, moving several corps against it and delivering a short but decisive blow.'[9] Yet these concerns were waved aside. Sivers was ordered to mount an offensive into East Prussia, alongside Twelfth Army on his left, on 20 February, with *Stavka* assuming that all spare German troops had been used up in their operations in Poland and that they would 'not dare to attempt anything in East Prussia'.[10]

The German Eighth Army moved off into a blinding snowstorm on the morning of 7 February, with drifts up to a metre deep. The initial clashes were confusing as Siberian troops, surprised by the sight of enemy columns moving forward, mounted a series of rear-guard actions before withdrawing in good order. By the end of the first day, the southern pincer had bent the Russian line back, reached Johannisburg and taken almost 4,000 prisoners, mostly from a single division.[11] The response from the Russian High Command was one of confusion and cross-purposes. On 9 February, Ruzski ordered Sivers to unleash a 'decisive attack' on the German forces gathering on his left flank, while another telegram, arriving shortly afterwards, to his Chief of Staff, Alexei Budberg, authorized him to begin destroying the railways to hinder any subsequent German advance.[12]

It was at this moment, when Sivers' attention was drawn to his left flank, that the main attack came on the right. Just as Hindenburg and Ludendorff had intended, the German Tenth Army arrived like a hammer blow, scattering the Russian defenders with a series of short, sharp battles preceded by powerful artillery support.

Focused on the attack in the south, General Sivers sent what few reserves he had to his left flank, and when General Yepanchin, commander of III Corps on the embattled right flank, reported on how he was being overrun, Sivers dismissed his concerns. 'There was no reason to attach any significance to the enemy forces bypassing your right flank', he wrote on 10 February, 'because the actions of the Germans are demonstrative and cannot develop into a serious threat'.[13] Compounding this was a devastating lack of intelligence on German movements. Russian cavalry, which should have provided Sivers with a sense of what the enemy was doing, had already saddled up and left the battlefield, trotting off to the east towards the town of Olita. Their commander, General Leontovich, made no attempt to establish communication with Sivers for three days, leaving him in the dark about the extent to which his right flank had been crushed. This dereliction of duty was, according to Sivers' Chief of Staff, a 'colossal' failure. Instead of writing a 'brilliant page in the history of the Russian cavalry', Leontovich took charge of Olita and began the systematic looting of local warehouses.[14]

The failure to react quickly to the northern pincer almost proved fatal to Tenth Army. With three German corps rapidly moving around its open flank, Sivers' command was in danger of being surrounded and destroyed, as Samsonov had been at Tannenberg. By 11 February, scattered groups of soldiers, leaderless and without equipment, were trudging away from the fighting eastwards towards Kovno and Mariampol. By the time Sivers authorized a general retreat, ignoring a direct order from Ruzski to hold on, it was almost too late. It then became a question of how many units could extricate themselves from the advancing German wings. Running across abandoned supply wagons, depots and stores, the attackers were able to keep themselves resupplied, pushing on each day despite mounting exhaustion. One German battalion commander remembered how the horses sank up to

their stomachs in the snow. 'We can barely make out our route, all that can be seen are vast, white expanses of snow. The only signposts to guide the way are scraps of straw nailed to the trees. Then even these run out as there are no trees left in sight. What is road, trench, field? Everything is just one huge expanse of snow. Marching takes five times longer than in normal conditions. The last stretch of the march in particular, which had us wading through snow up to our hips and clambering over hills, was excruciatingly hard.'[15]

As the Russian retreat gathered momentum, XX Corps (occupying the centre of Sivers' line at Goldap) found itself threatened on both flanks. Commencing its retreat on 10 February, the corps headed for Suwalki, only to find German cavalry already ahead of it, so it changed direction and took refuge in the thick pines of the Augustów Forest – ancient woodland that had once been the property of the Polish kings. Within a matter of days, XX Corps was surrounded by an iron ring of German units. Desperate attempts were made to break out to the east, but they all failed, with German howitzers zeroing in on the Russian positions and causing carnage. 'The troops were so mixed that the senior commanders had barely any influence over the course of events in the forest', recorded one witness:

> Ammunition was running low, both for the infantry and for the artillery. The forest roads were so crowded with various carts that it became impossible to transport cartridges from ammunition park carts. As the fire ceased, the soldiers disposed of artillery equipment, gun locks, and where possible, the guns themselves, by throwing them into the river. Horses were shot with revolvers so as not to increase the enemy's trophies. The agony of defence proceeded slowly but surely. Dense lines of enemy soldiers approached closer and closer after their artillery ceased fire. Our troops, having shot all their ammunition, sold their lives dearly.[16]

Thousands of Russians would be taken prisoner in the Augustów Forest, rounded up in milling, leaderless groups and transported through the snow into captivity. With the rest of Sivers' army pushed southeast over the Niemen, there would be no grand repetition of Tannenberg, when an entire army was destroyed, which caused

frustration at *OberOst*. 'However gratifying it was to have defeated the 10th Russian Army . . . we did not succeed in carrying out the operations to the desired end, nor in attaining the full strategic advantages we had looked for', wrote Hoffmann.[17] As for Hindenburg and Ludendorff, there were mixed feelings: pride at what German arms had accomplished, tempered by the disappointment that somehow Sivers' army had escaped. There was also a growing awareness of how worn out their troops had become, and after the destruction of XX Corps, *OberOst* had reluctantly withdrawn its forces back to East Prussia – fighting off heavy Russian counter-attacks as it did so.

The Grand Duke had ordered these attacks, which continued for weeks, trying to restore Russian pride and push the Germans back to their border. They changed little in a wider sense, but were a terrible ordeal for those men who found themselves advancing across open ground, often uphill, towards the enemy trenches. 'The ground was frozen, and our lines, which had to drop flat to get cover from crashing enemy fire, could not dig in and every last man was shot . . .' one participant remembered. 'The battle lasted for three days. For three days our units would rise to attack, then get shot and cling to the ground again to suffer the freezing cold. At noon, the top layer of the earth thawed and turned to mud. The Grenadiers used this opportunity and raked the mud with their hands to make some kind of cover. By the evening, the wet overcoats would freeze, turning into dirty bark. The rifles, covered with frozen mud, would not fire and were turned into clubs.'[18] By mid-March, it was over. The Grand Duke ordered a strict defensive on the Northwest Front and accepted the resignation of General Ruzski, who had asked to be relieved of his position 'for the state of his health, owing to extreme fatigue and a general weakening of the body'. He was replaced by Ivanov's Chief of Staff, General Alekseev.[19]

The kind of operational spectacular that Hindenburg and Ludendorff could seemingly pull off at will was beyond the abilities of Conrad von Hötzendorf, who continued in his quixotic attempt to relieve Przemyśl. Conrad may have told the Emperor (or indeed anyone who would listen) that Austrian suffering *enabled* German success, but this brought little comfort to an army that had known almost nothing but

defeat and futility since the opening days of the war. A second offensive in the Carpathians was launched on 27 February, but it was no more successful than the first had been and produced yet more shattered regiments, shivering, frostbitten wounded, and piles of frozen bodies in the snow. General Böhm-Ermolli, brought in because he was seen as a more pliable commander than the gruff Boroević, proved unable to get his army moving in the way that Conrad wanted. Already there were signs of mounting unease across the officer corps. Almost all the corps commanders of Second Army, which would lead the new attack, reported on the exhaustion of their men, while also complaining about the lack of mountain guns, which meant that their infantry often had to attack without any artillery support whatsoever – an almost suicidal task in 1915.[20]

The lack of Austrian artillery had been bad enough in the early months of the war, but it was now a chronic problem. In October 1914, the Austrian High Command had drafted a list of its requirements for more firepower, including light and mountain guns, the production of a modern field howitzer and the greater availability of 15 cm howitzers and 10 cm cannons. This was followed in February by a further demand that each infantry division be equipped with 24 field guns, 36 light howitzers and eight assorted heavier weapons – a total of 68 guns – which would put Austrian divisions on a par with their German counterparts. But such an ambitious programme would take months, maybe even years, to implement, which left the War Ministry scrabbling around in the meantime. Guns being constructed for foreign countries in the Škoda Works (Austria's most important industrial conglomerate) were confiscated, and the empire's reserve pool of artillery was plundered, but even these desperate measures only made a small difference to an army that had been under-gunned in peacetime and was now in danger of simply being unable to fulfil even modest operational requirements.[21]

In the Carpathians, snow and ice had been replaced by mud and water as rainfall saturated the hills, with guns, men and horses sinking into slime as they endeavoured to move up to the ever-shifting front line. With storms threatening to wash away the roads and bridges that the army relied upon, there was a danger that supply routes would